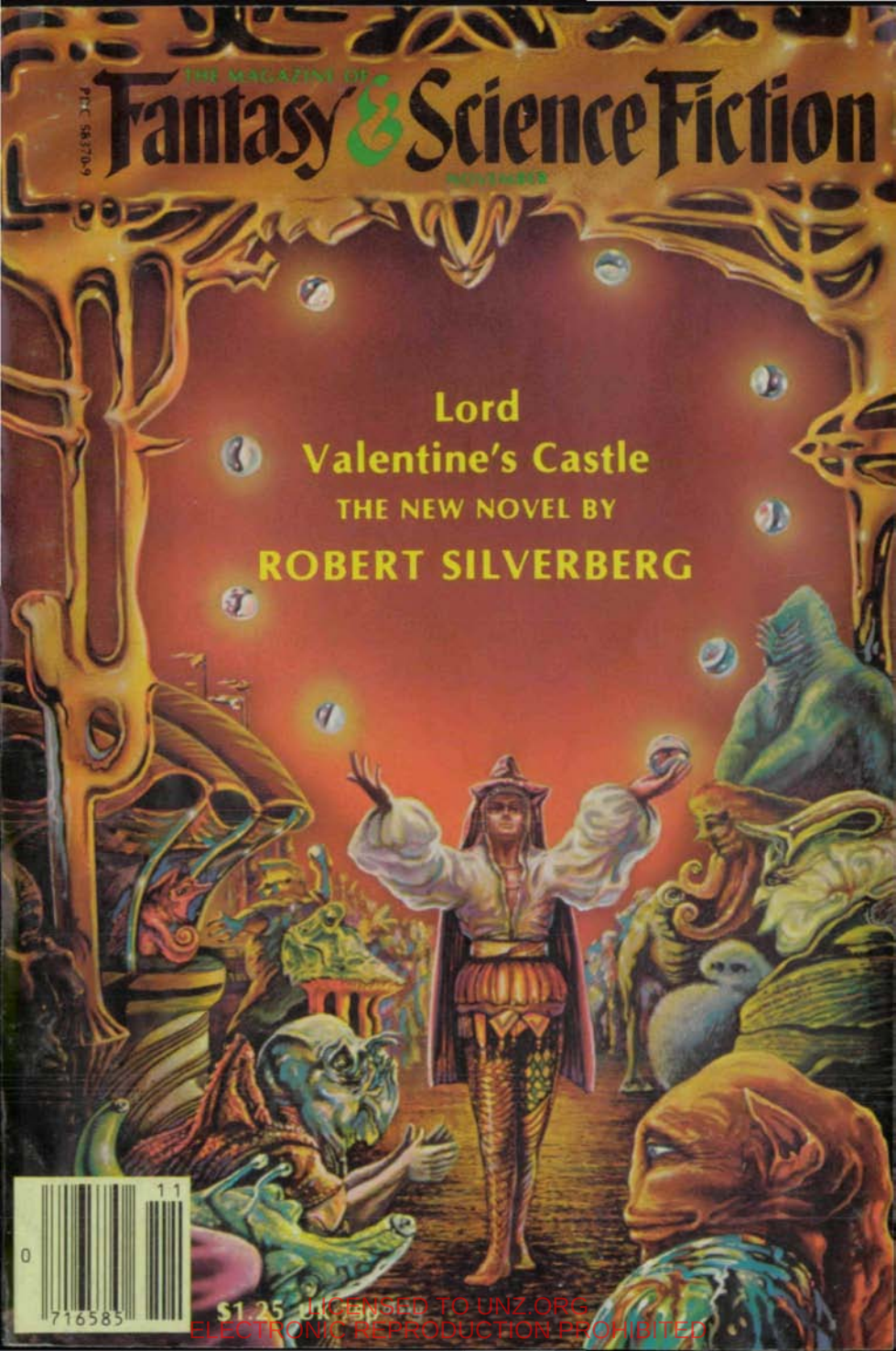

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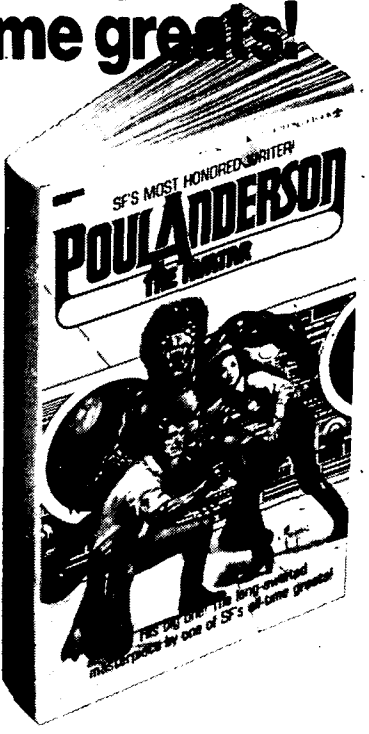

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Lord

ONE: THE BOOK OF THE KING OF DREAMS

And then, after walking all day through a golden haze of humid warmth that gathered about him like fine wet fleece, Valentine came to a great ridge of outcropping white stone overlooking the city of Pidruid. It was the provincial capital, sprawling and splendid, the biggest city he had come upon since — since? — the biggest in a long while of wandering, at any rate.

There he halted, finding a seat at the edge of the soft, crumbling white ridge, digging his booted feet into the flaking ragged stone, and sat there staring down at Pidruid, blinking as though he were newly out of sleep. On this summer day twilight was still some hours away, and the sun hung high to the southwest, beyond Pidruid, somewhere out over the Great Sea. I will rest here for a while, Valentine thought, and then I will go down into Pidruid and find lodging for the night.

As he rested he heard pebbles tumbling past him from a higher point on the ridge. Unhurriedly he turned and looked back the way he had come. A young herdsman had appeared, a boy with straw-colored hair and a freckled face, leading a train of fifteen or twenty mounts down the hill road. They were fat sleek purple-skinned beasts, obviously well looked after. The boy's own mount looked older and less plump, a wise and toughened creature.

"Hoy!" he called down to Valentine. "Where are you bound?"

"Pidruid. And you?"

"The same. Bringing these mounts to market. Thirsty work it is, too. Do you have wine?"

"Some," Valentine said. He tapped the flask at his hip, where a fiercer man might wear a weapon. "Good red midcountry wine. I'll be sorry to see the last of it."

"Give me a drink and I'll let you ride into town with me."

"Done," said Valentine.

He got to his feet as the boy dismounted and scrambled down the ridge toward him. Valentine offered him the flask. The boy was no more than fourteen or fifteen, he guessed, and small for

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Robert Silverberg's first novel in several years is a blend of polished, mature writing and grand storytelling; in brief an intelligent adventure story and a happy event for this magazine and for science fiction. The story opens on the giant planet Majipoor, as a young wanderer named Valentine, suffering from loss of memory, arrives at the provincial capital of Pidruid. The novel is presented here in four parts, more than 160,000 words, and we do not think you will want to miss a single one.

Valentine's Castle

BY

ROBERT SILVERBERG

his age, though deep through the chest and brawny. He came hardly elbow-high to Valentine, who was tall but not unusually so, a sturdy man just above middle height, with wide flat shoulders and big capable hands.

The boy swirled the wine in the flask, inhaled in a knowing way, nodded his approval, took a deep gulp, sighed. "I've been eating dust all the way from Falkynkip! And this stickly heat — it chokes you! Another dry hour and I'd have been a dead one." He returned the wine to Valentine. "You live in town?"

Valentine frowned. "No."

"Here for the festival, then?"

"Festival?"

"You don't know?"

Valentine shook his head. He felt the pressure of the boy's bright, mocking eyes, and was confused. "I've been traveling. I haven't followed the news. Is this festival time in Pidruid?"

"This week it is," said the boy. "Beginning on Starday. The grand parade, the circus, the royal celebration. Look down there. Don't you see *him* entering the city even now?"

He pointed. Valentine sighted along the boy's outstretched arm and squinted, peering at Pidruid's southern corner, but all he saw was a jumble of green-tiled rooftops and a tangle of ancient streets following no rational plan. Again he shook his head. "There," the

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boy said impatiently. "Down by the harbor. See? The ships? The five tremendous ones, with *his* banner flying from the rigging? And there's the procession, coming through Dragon Gate, just beginning to march Black Highway. I think that's his chariot, coming up now by the Arch of Dreams. Don't you see? Is there something wrong with your eyes?"

"I don't know the city," said Valentine mildly. "But, yes, I see the harbor, the five ships."

"Good. Now follow along inland a little way — the big stone gate? And the wide highway running through it? And that ceremonial arch, just this side of —"

"I see it now, yes."

"And his banner over the chariot?"

"Whose banner? If I sound dim, forgive me, but —"

"Whose? Whose? Lord Valentine's banner! Lord Valentine's chariot! Lord Valentine's bodyguard marching through the streets of Pidruid! Don't you know the Coronal has arrived?"

"I didn't."

"And the festival! Why do you think there's a festival at this time of summer, if not to welcome the Coronal?"

Valentine smiled. "I've been traveling and I haven't followed the news. Would you like more wine?"

"There's not much left," the boy said.

"Go on. Finish it. I'll buy more in Pidruid."

He handed over the flask and turned toward the city again, letting his gaze travel down the slope and across the woodsy suburbs to the dense and teeming city, and outward toward the waterfront, and to the great ships, the banners, the marching warriors, the chariot of the Coronal. So this must be a great moment in the history of Pidruid, for the Coronal ruled from far-off Castle Mount, all the way on the other side of the world, so distant that he and it were almost legendary, distances being what they were on this world of Majipoor. Coronals of Majipoor did not come often to the western continent. But Valentine was oddly unmoved by the knowledge of the presence of his glittering namesake down below there. I am here and the Coronal is here, he thought, and he will sleep tonight in some splendid palace of the masters of Pidruid, and I will sleep in some pile of hay, and then there will be a grand festival, and what is that to me? He felt almost apologetic, being so placid in the face of the boy's excitement. It was a discourtesy.

He said, "Forgive me. I know so little of what's been happening in the world these past months. Why is the Coronal here?"

"He makes the grand processional," said the boy. "To every part of the realm, to mark his coming to power. This is the new one, you know. Lord Valentine, only two years on his throne. The brother to Lord Voriax who died. You knew that, that Lord

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Voriax was dead, that Lord Valentine was our Coronal?"

"I had heard," said Valentine vaguely.

"Well, that's he, down there in Pidruid. Touring the realm for the first time since he got the Castle. He's been down south all month, in the jungle provinces, and yesterday he sailed up the coast to Pidruid, and tonight he enters the city, and in a few days there'll be the festival, and food and drink for everyone, games, dancing, delights, a great market too, where I'll sell these animals for a fortune. Afterwards he travels overland through the whole continent of Zimroel, from capital to capital, a journey of so many thousands of miles it makes my head ache to think of it, and from the eastern shore he'll sail back to Alhanroel and Castle Mount, and none of us in Zimroel will see him again for twenty years or more. A fine thing it must be to be Coronal!" The boy laughed. "That was good wine. My name's Shanamir. What's yours?"

"Valentine."

"Valentine? *Valentine?* An auspicious name!"

"A common one, I'm afraid."

"Put *Lord* in front of it and you'd be the Coronal!"

"It's not as easy as that. Besides, why would I want to be Coronal?"

"The power," said Shanamir, wide-eyed. "The fine clothes, the food, the wine, the jewels, the palaces, the women —"

"The responsibility," Valentine said somberly. "The burden. Do you think a Coronal does nothing but drink golden wine and march in grand processions? Do you think he's put there just to enjoy himself?"

The boy considered. "Perhaps not."

"He rules over billions upon billions of people, across territories so huge we can't comprehend them. Everything falls on his shoulders. To carry out the decrees of the Pontifex, to sustain order, to support justice in every land — it tires me to think of it, boy. He keeps the world from collapsing into chaos. I don't envy him. Let him have the job."

Shanamir said, after a moment, "You're not as stupid as I first thought, Valentine."

"Did you think I was stupid, then?"

"Well, simple. Easy of mind. Here you are a grown man, and you seem to know so little of certain things, and I half your age and I have to explain. But perhaps I misjudge you. Shall we go down into Pidruid?"

2.

Valentine had his pick of the mounts the boy was bringing to market, but they all seemed alike to him; and after making a pretense of choosing, he took one at random, vaulting lightly into the creature's natural saddle. It was good to ride, after so long on foot. The mount was comfortable, as well it might be, for they had been bred for comfort for thousands of years, these artificial animals, these witchcraft-creatures out of the old days, strong and tireless and

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patient, able to convert any sort of trash into food. The skill of making them was long forgotten, but now they bred of themselves, like natural animals, and it would be a slow business getting about on Majipoor without them.

The road to Pidruid led along the high ridge for more than a mile, then began sudden sharp switchbacks down into the coastal plain. Valentine let the boy do most of the talking as they made the descent. Shanamir came, he said, from a district two and a half days' journey inland, to the northeast; there he and his brothers and his father raised mounts for sale at Pidruid market and turned a good living at it; he was thirteen years old and had a high opinion of himself; he had never been outside the province of which Pidruid was the capital; but someday he meant to go abroad, to travel everywhere on Majipoor, to make the pilgrimage to the Isle of Sleep and kneel before the Lady, to cross the Inner Sea to Alhanroel and achieve the ascent of Castle Mount, even to go down south, maybe, beyond the steaming tropics, into the burnt and barren domain of the King of Dreams; for what was the use of being alive and healthy on a world as full of wonders as Majipoor if you did not journey hither and thither about on it?

"And you, Valentine?" he asked suddenly. "Who are you, where from, whither bound?"

Valentine was caught by surprise, lulled by the boy's prattle and the steady gentle rhythm of the mount as it padded down the broad twisting road, and the burst of jabbing questions left him unprepared. He said only, "I come from the eastern provinces. I have no plans beyond Pidruid. I'll stay here until I have reason to leave."

"Why have you come?"

"Why not?"

"Ah," said Shanamir. "All right. I know purposeful evasion when I hear it. You're the younger son of a duke in Ni-moya or Piliplok, and you sent someone a mischievous dream and were caught at it, and your father gave you a pouch of money and told you to vanish to the far side of the continent. Right?"

"Precisely," Valentine said, with a wink.

"And you're loaded with royals and crowns, and you're going to set yourself up like a prince in Pidruid and drink and dance until your last coin is gone, and then you'll hire aboard a seagoing vessel and ship out for Alhanroel, and you'll take me with you as your squire. Isn't that so?"

"You have it exactly, my friend. Except for the money. I neglected to provide for that part of your fantasy."

"But you have *some* money," said Shanamir, not so playfully now. "You aren't a beggar, are you? They're very hard on beggars in Pidruid. They don't allow any sort of vagrancy down there."

"I have a few coins," Valentine said. "Enough to carry me through festival time and a bit beyond. And then I'll see."

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"If you do go to sea, take me with you, Valentine!"

"If I do, I will," he promised.

They were halfway down the slope now. The city of Pidruid lay in a great basin along the coast, rimmed by low gray hills on the inland side and along much of the shore, save only where a break in the outer range allowed the sea to spill through, forming a blue-green bay that was Pidruid's magnificent harbor. As he approached sea level here in late afternoon, Valentine felt the offshore breezes blowing toward him, cool, fragrant, breaking the heat. Already white shoals of fog were rolling toward the shore out of the west, and there was a salty tang to the air, thick as it was now with water that had embraced the fishes and sea-dragons only hours before. Valentine was awed by the size of the city that lay before him. He could not remember ever having seen a larger one; but there was so much, after all, that he could not remember.

This was the edge of the continent. All of Zimroel lay at his back, and for all he knew he had walked it from end to end, from one of the eastern ports indeed, Ni-moya or Piliplok, except that he knew himself to be a young man, not very young but young enough, and he doubted that it was possible to have made such a journey on foot in one lifetime, and he had no recollection of having been on any sort of mount until this afternoon. On the other hand, he seemed to know how to ride; he had lifted himself knowledgeably into the beast's broad saddle, and that argued that he must have ridden at least part of the way before. It did not matter. He was here now, and he felt no restlessness; since Pidruid was where he had somehow arrived, Pidruid was where he would stay, until there was reason to go elsewhere. He lacked Shanamir's hunger for travel. The world was so big it did not bear thinking about, three great continents, two enormous seas, a place that one could comprehend fully only in dreams and even then not bring much of the truth of it away into the waking world. They said this Lord Valentine the Coronal lived in a castle eight thousand years old, with five rooms for every year of its existence, and that the castle sat upon a mountain so tall it pierced the sky, a colossal peak thirty miles high, on whose slopes were fifty cities as big as Pidruid. Such a thing as that did not bear much thought either. The world was too big, too old, too populous for one man's mind. I will live in this city of Pidruid, he thought, and I will find a way to pay for my food and lodging, and I will be happy.

"Naturally you don't have a bed reserved in an inn," Shanamir said.

"Of course not."

"It stands to reason you wouldn't. And naturally everything in town is full, this being festival time and the Coronal already here. So where will you sleep, Valentine?"

"Anywhere. Under a tree. On a mound of rags. In the public park. That looks like a park there, over to the

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right, that stretch of green with the tall trees."

"You remember what I told you about vagrants in Pidruid? They'll find you and lock you deep for a month, and when they let you out, they'll have you sweeping dung until you can buy your way out of your fine, which at the pay of a dung-sweeper will take you the rest of your life."

"At least dung-sweeping's steady work," Valentine said.

Shanamir didn't laugh. "There's an inn the mount-sellers stay at. I'm known there, or rather my father is. We'll get you in somehow. But what would you have done without me?"

"Become a dung-sweeper, I suppose."

"You sound as though you really wouldn't mind." The boy touched his mount's ear, halting it, and looked closely at him. "Doesn't *anything* matter to you, Valentine? I don't understand you. Are you a fool, or simply the most carefree man on Majipoor?"

"I wish I knew," said Valentine.

At the foot of the hill the ridge road joined with a grand highway that came running down out of the north and curved westward toward Pidruid. The new road, wide and straight along the valley floor, was rimmed with low white markers stamped with the double crest of Pontifex and Coronal, the labyrinth and the starburst, and was paved in smooth blue-gray stuff of light resiliency, a springy, flawless roadbed that probably was of great antiquity, as were so many of the best things of this world. The mounts plodded tirelessly. Synthetic things that they were, they scarcely understood fatigue and would clop from Pidruid to Piliplok without resting and without complaining. From time to time Shanamir glanced back, checking for strays, since the beasts were not tied; but they remained blandly in their places, one after another, blunt snout of one close behind coarse ropy tail of another, along the flank of the highway.

Now the sun was faintly tinged with late-day bronze, and the city lay close before them. A stunning sight presented itself in this part of the road: on both shoulders of it had been planted noble trees, twenty times the height of a man, with slim tapering trunks of dark bluish bark and mighty crowns of glistening greenish-black leaves sharp as daggers. Out of those crowns burst astounding clusters of bloom, red tipped with yellow, that blazed like beacons as far as Valentine could see.

"What are those trees?" he asked.

"Fireshower palms," Shanamir said. "Pidruid is famous for them. They grow only near the coast and flower just one week a year. In the winter they drop sour berries that make a strong liquor. You'll drink it tomorrow."

"The Coronal has picked a good moment to come here, then."

"Not by chance, I imagine."

On and on the twin column of brilliant trees stretched, and they followed along, until open fields yielded to the

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first country villas, and then suburban tracts thick with more modest homes, and then a dusty zone of small factories, and finally the ancient wall of Pidruid itself, half as high as a fireshower tree, pierced by a pointed arch set with archaic-looking battlements. "Falkynkip Gate," Shanamir announced. "The eastern entrance to Pidruid. Now we enter the capital. Eleven million souls here, Valentine, and all the races of Majipoor to be found, not just humans, no, everything here, all mixed together, Skandars and Hjorts and Liimen and all the rest. Even, so they say, a little group of Shapeshifters."

"Shapeshifters?"

"The old race. The first natives."

"We call them Metamorphs," Valentine said.

"The same. Yes. I've heard they're called that in the east. You have a strange accent, do you know that?"

"No stranger than yours, friend."

Shanamir laughed. "To me your accent is strange. And I have no accent at all. I speak normal speech. You shape your words with fancy sounds. *'We call them Metamorphs.'*" he said, mimicking. "That's how you sound to me. Is that Ni-moyan talk?"

Valentine replied only with a shrug.

Shanamir said, "They frighten me, Shapeshifters. Metamorphs. This would be a happier planet without them. Sneaking around, immitating others, working mischief. I wish they would keep to their own territory."

"Mostly they do, I understand."

"Mostly. But they say a few live in each city. Plotting who knows what kind of trouble for the rest of us." Shanamir leaned across toward Valentine, caught his arm, peered solemnly into his face. "One might meet one anywhere. Sitting on a ridge looking out toward Pidruid on a hot afternoon, for example."

"So you think I'm a Metamorph in masquerade?"

The boy cackled. "Prove that you aren't!"

Valentine groped for some way to demonstrate his authenticity, found none, and made a terrifying face instead, stretching his cheeks as though they were rubber, twisting his lips in opposite directions, rolling his eyeballs high. "My true visage," he said. "You have discovered me." And they laughed and passed on through Falkynkip Gate into the city of Pidruid.

Within the gate everything seemed much older, the houses built in a curious angular style, humpbacked walls swelling outward and upward to tiled roofs, and the tiles themselves often chipped and broken and interspersed with heavy clumps of low fleshy-leaved roofweeds that had gained footholds in cracks and earthy pockets. A heavy layer of fog lay over the city, and it was dark and cool beneath it, with lights glowing in almost every window. The main highway split, and split again, until now Shanamir was leading his animals down a much narrower street, though still a fairly straight one,

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with secondary streets coiling off from it in every direction. The streets were thick with folk. Such crowds made Valentine obscurely uncomfortable; he had no memory of having had so many others so close about him at once, almost at his elbow, smack up against his mount, pushing, darting about, a jostling mob of porters, merchants, mariners, vendors, people from the hill country like Shanamir bringing animals or produce to the market, tourists in fine robes of glowing brocades, and little boys and girls underfoot everywhere. Festival time in Pidruid! Gaudy banners of scarlet cloth were strung across the street from the upper stories of buildings, two and three on every block, emblazoned with the starburst crest, hailing in bright green lettering Lord Valentine the Coronal, bidding him be welcome to this his westernmost metropolis.

"Is it far to your inn?" Valentine asked.

"Halfway across town. Are you hungry?"

"A little. More than a little."

Shanamir signaled to his beasts and they marched obediently into a cobbled cul-de-sac between two arcades, where he left them. Then, dismounting, he pointed out a tiny grimy booth across the street. Skewered sausages hung grilling over a charcoal flame. The counterman was a Liiman, squat and hammerheaded, with pocked grayblack skin and three eyes that glowed like coals in a crater. The boy pantomimed, and the Liiman, passed two skewers of sausages to them, and poured tumblers of pale amber beer. Valentine produced a coin and laid it on the counter. It was a fine thick coin, bright and gleaming with a milled edge, and the Liiman looked at it as though Valentine had offered him a scorpion. Hastily Shanamir scooped up the piece and put down one of his own, a squarish coppery coin with a triangular hole punched in the center. The other he returned to Valentine. They retreated to the cul-de-sac with their dinner.

"What did I do wrong?" Valentine asked.

"With that coin you could buy the Liiman and all his sausages, and a month of beer! Where did you get it?"

"Why, from my purse."

"Are there more like that in there?"

"It could be," said Valentine. He studied the coin, which bore on one face the image of the Pontifex Tyeveras, gaunt and withered, and on the other the visage of Lord Voriax, the late Coronal. The denomination was fifty royals. "Will this be too valuable to use anywhere?" he asked. "What will it buy, in truth?"

"Five of my mounts," Shanamir said. "A year's lodgings. Transportation to Alhanroel and back. Any of those. Perhaps even more. To most of us it would be many months' wages. You have no idea of the value of things?"

Valentine looked abashed. "It would seem that way."

"These sausages cost ten weights. A

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hundred weights make a crown, a hundred crowns make a royal, and this is fifty of those. Now do you follow? I'll change it for you at the market. Meanwhile keep it to yourself. This is an honest city and a safe one, more or less, but with a purse full of those you tempt fate. Why didn't you tell me you were carrying a fortune?" Shanamir gestured broadly. "Because you didn't know, I suppose. There's such a strange innocence about you, Valentine. You make me feel like a man, and I'm only a boy. You seem so much like a child. Do you even know how old you are? I suspect you couldn't say. Finish your beer and let's move along."

Valentine nodded. One hundred weights to a crown, he thought, one hundred crowns to a royal, and he wondered what he would have said had Shanamir pressed him on the matter of his age. Twenty-eight? Thirty-two? He had no idea. What if he were asked in earnest? Thirty-two, he decided. That had a good sound to it. Yes, I am thirty-two years old, and one hundred crowns make a royal, and the shining piece that shows Tyeveras and Voriax is worth fifty of those.

3.

The road to Shanamir's inn led squarely through the heart of Pidruid, across districts that even at this late hour were crowded and hectic. Valentine asked if that were on account of the visit of the Coronal, but Shanamir said no, the city was like this all the time, for it was the major port of the western coast of Zimroel. From here went vessels to every part of Majipoor: up and down this busy coast, but also across the Inner Sea on the enormous journey to Alhanroel, a voyage requiring the better part of a year, and there was even some commerce with the sparsely populated southern continent, Suvrael, the sun-blasted lair of the King of Dreams. When Valentine thought of the totality of Majipoor, he felt oppressed by the weight of the world, the sheer mass of it, and yet he knew that was foolish, for was not Majipoor a light and airy place, a giant bubble of a planet, huge but without much substance, so that one felt forever buoyant, forever afloat? Why this leaden sense of pressure across his back, why these moments of unfounded dismay? He led himself quickly back to an easier mood. Soon he would sleep, and the morning would be a day of new marvels.

"We cross the Golden Plaza," said Shanamir, "and on the far side of it we take Water Road, that leads to the piers, and our inn is ten minutes out that way. You'll find the plaza amazing."

Indeed it was, such of it that Valentine was able to see: a vast rectangular space, wide enough to drill two armies in, bordered on all four sides by immense square-topped buildings on whose broad flat faces were inlaid dazzling designs in gold leaf, so that by the evening's torchlight the great towers blazed with reflected light and were

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more brilliant than the fireshower trees. But there was no crossing the plaza tonight. A hundred paces from its eastern entrance it was roped off with thick braided cord of red plush, behind which stood troops in the uniform of the Coronal's bodyguard, smug, impassive, arms folded across their green-and-gold jerkins. Shanamir leaped from his mount and trotted forward and spoke quickly with a vendor. When he returned he said angrily, "They have it entirely blocked. May the King of Dreams send them prickly sleep tonight!"

"What's happening?"

"The Coronal has taken lodging in the mayor's palace — that's the tallest building, with the jagged golden swirls on its walls, on the far side over there — and nobody can get near it tonight. We can't even go around the plaza's inner rim, because there's such a mob piled up there, waiting for a glimpse of Lord Valentine. So it's a detour for us, an hour or more, the long way around. Well, sleep isn't that important, I suppose. Look, there he is!"

Shanamir indicated a balcony high on the facade of the mayor's palace. Figures had emerged on it. At this distance they were no larger than mice, but mice of dignity and grandeur, clad in sumptuous robes; Valentine could see at least that much. There were five of them, and the central personage was surely the Coronal. Shanamir was straining and standing on tiptoe for a better view. Valentine could make out very little: a dark-haired man, possibly bearded, in heavy white steetmoy-fur robe over a doublet in green or light blue. The Coronal stood at the front of the balcony, spreading his arms toward the crowd, who made the starburst symbol with their outstretched fingers and shouted his name again and again: "Valentine! Valentine! Lord Valentine!"

And Shanamir, at Valentine's side, cried out too: "Valentine! Lord Valentine!"

Valentine felt a fierce shudder of revulsion. "Listen to them!" he muttered. "Yelling as if he's the Divine Itself, come down for dinner in Pidruid. He's only a man, isn't he? When his bowels are full he empties them, yes?"

Shanamir blinked in shock. "He's the Coronal!"

"He means nothing to me, even as I mean less than nothing to him."

"He governs. He administers justice. He holds back chaos. You said those things yourself. Aren't such things worthy of your respect?"

"Respect, yes. But not my worship."

"To worship the king is nothing new. My father has told me of olden times. They had kings as far back as Old Earth itself, and I'll bet they were worshipped, Valentine, in scenes far more wild than what you see here tonight."

"And some were drowned by their own slaves, and some were poisoned by their chief ministers, and some were

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smothered by their wives, and some were overthrown by the people they pretended to serve, and every last one was buried and forgotten." Valentine felt himself growing surprisingly warm with anger. He spat in disgust. "And many lands on Old Earth got along without kings altogether. Why do we need them on Majipoor? These expensive Coronals, and the weird old Pontifex hiding in his Labyrinth, and the sender of bad dreams out of Suvreal — no, Shanamir, I may be too simple to understand it, but it makes no sense to me. This frenzy! These screams of delight! No one screams delight, I'll wager, when the Mayor of Pidruid rides through the streets."

"We need kings," Shanamir insisted. "This world is too big to be ruled by mayors alone. We need great and potent symbols, monarchs who are almost like gods, to hold things together. Look. Look." The boy pointed toward the balcony. "Up there, that little figure in the white robe: the Coronal of Majipoor. You feel nothing go shivering down your back when I say that?"

"Nothing."

"You get no thrill, knowing that there are twenty billion people on this world and only one is Coronal, and that tonight you behold him with your own eyes, something which you will never do again? You feel no awe?"

"None."

"You're a strange one, Valentine. I've never met anyone like you at all. How could anyone be untouched by the sight of the Coronal?"

"I am," said Valentine, shrugging, a little puzzled by it himself. "Come, let's get out of here. This mob tires me. Let's find the inn."

It was a long journey around the plaza, for all streets ran into it but few ran parallel to it, and Valentine and Shanamir had to move in ever-widening circles while trying to proceed westward, with the train of mounts clopping placidly wherever Shanamir led. But at last they emerged from a district of hotels and fine shops into one of warehouses and lofts, and approached the edge of the waterfront, and came finally to a weatherbeaten inn of warped black timbers and frayed thatching, with stables to the rear. Shanamir housed his beasts and went through a courtyard to the innkeeper's quarters, leaving Valentine alone in the shadows. He waited a long while. It seemed to him that even here he could hear the blurred and muffled cries: *"Valentine ... Valentine ... Lord Valentine!"* But it meant nothing whatever to him that multitudes were crying his name, for it was the name of another.

Shanamir returned in time, sprinting lightly and silently across the yard.

"It's arranged. Give me some money."

"The fifty?"

"Smaller. Much smaller. A half-crown or so."

Valentine groped for coins, sorted through them by dim lamplight, handed several well-worn pieces to Shana-

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mir. "For the lodging?" he asked.

"To bribe the doorkeeper," Shanamir replied. "Places to sleep are hard to come by tonight. Crowding in one more means less room for everybody, and if someone counts heads and complains, it's the doorkeeper must back us up. Follow me and say nothing."

They went in. The place smelled of salt air and mildew. Just within, a fat grayish-faced Hjort sat like an enormous toad at a desk, arranging playing-cards in patterns. The rough-skinned creature barely looked up. Shanamir laid the coins before him and the Hjort signaled with an almost imperceptible flicker of its head. Onward, to a long narrow windowless room, lit by three widely spaced glow-floats that yielded a soft hazy reddish light. A row of mattresses spanned the length of the room, one close by the next on the floor, and nearly all of them were occupied. "Here," Shanamir said, nudging one with the tip of his boot. He stripped off his outer clothes and lay down, leaving room for Valentine. "Dream well," the boy said.

"Dream well," said Valentine, and kicked off his boots and shed his top garments, and dropped down beside him. Distant shouts echoed in his ears, or perhaps in his mind. It astonished him how weary he was. There might be dreams tonight, yes, and he would watch carefully for them so that he could sift them for meaning, but first there would be deep sleep, the sleep of the utterly exhausted. And in the morning? A new day. Anything might befall. Anything.

4.

There was a dream, of course, somewhere toward the depth of the night, and Valentine placed himself at a distance from it and watched it unfold, as he had been taught from childhood. Dreams held great significance; they were messages from the Powers that ruled the world, by which one was to guide one's life; they were ignored only at one's peril. Valentine saw himself crossing a vast purple plain under a baleful purple sky and a swollen amber sun. He was alone and his face was drawn, his eyes were tense and strained. As he marched, ugly fissures opened in the ground, gaping cracks that were bright orange within, and things popped forth like children's toys popping from a box, laughing shrilly at him and swiftly retreating into the fissures as they closed.

That was all. Not a full dream, then, for it had no story, no pattern of conflicts and resolution. It was only an image, a bizzarre scene, a slice from some larger canvas not yet revealed to him. He could not even tell whether it was a sending from the Lady, the blessed Lady of the Isle of Sleep, or from the malevolent King of Dreams. He lay half awake, pondering it awhile, and decided at last to give it no deeper consideration. He felt oddly adrift, cut free from his own inner self: it was as

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though he had not even existed, the day before yesterday. And even the wisdom of dreams was concealed from him now.

He slept again, a sleep unbroken except when a light patter of rain fell briefly but noisily, and he was unaware of further dreams. Early light woke him: warm golden-green light pouring in through the far end of the long narrow hall. The door stood open. He was alone, except for a couple of snorers deeper into the room. Shanamir was nowhere about.

Valentine rose, stretched, flexed his arms and legs, dressed. He washed at a basin against the wall and stepped out into the courtyard, feeling alert, energetic, ready for whatever this day might bring. The morning air was thick with moisture, but warm and bright, and last night's fog had altogether burned off; out of a clear sky came the throbbing heat of the summer sun. In the courtyard grew three great vines, one along each wall, with gnarled woody trunks broader than a man's waist, and a shovel-shaped glossy leaves of a deep bronze hue, the new growth bright red. The vine was abloom with showy yellow blossoms like little trumpets, but also it bore ripened fruit, heavy blue-white berries glistening with beads of wetness. Valentine plucked one boldly and ate it: sweet, tart as well, with the headiness of very young wine. He had another, then reached for a third and thought better of it.

Circling the courtyard, he peered into the stables and saw Shanamir's mounts munching quietly on bits of straw, but no Shanamir. Off on business, perhaps. Onward now around a bend, and the odor of grilled fish came to him and made him tingle with sudden hunger. He pushed open a rickety door and found himself in a kitchen where a small weary-looking man was cooking breakfast for half a dozen lodgers of several races. The cook looked at Valentine without interest.

"Am I too late to eat?" Valentine asked softly.

"Take a seat. Fish and beer, eight weights."

He found a half-crown piece and laid it on the stove. The cook pushed a few coppers back at him and threw another filet onto his griddle. Valentine took a seat against the wall. Several of the diners got up to depart, and one, a slender, lithe young woman with close-clipped black hair, paused near him. "The beer's in that pitcher," she said. "You help yourself around here."

"Thank you," said Valentine, but she was already out the door.

He poured a mugful — it was heavy, tangy stuff, thick against his tongue. In a minute he had his fish, crisply cooked and sweet. He ate it swiftly. "Another?" he said to the cook, who eyed him sourly but complied.

As he ate, Valentine become aware that a lodger at the next table — a

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Hjort, thick-bodied and puffy-faced, with pebble-textured ashen skin and big bulging eyes — was peering intently at him. The strange surveillance made Valentine uncomfortable. After a time he glanced directly back at the Hjort, who blinked and looked quickly away. Some moments later the Hjort turned to Valentine again and said, "Just got here, did you?"

"Last night."

"Staying long?"

"Through the festival, at least," Valentine said.

Definitely there was something about the Hjort that he instinctively disliked. Perhaps it was merely his looks, for Valentine found Hjorts unattractive, coarse and bloated creatures. But that was unkind, he knew. Hjorts bore no responsibility for the way they looked, and, anyway, they probably found humans equally disagreeable, pale scrawny things with disgustingly smooth skins.

Or possibly it was the intrusion on his privacy that bothered him, the staring, the questions. Or maybe just the way the Hjort had decorated the fleshy daubs of orange pigment. Whatever it was, it made him feel queasy and bothered.

But he felt mild guilt for such prejudices and he had no wish to be unsociable. By way of atoning he offered a lukewarm smile and said, "My name's Valentine. I'm from Ni-moya."

Long way to come," said the Hjort, chewing noisily.

"You live near here?"

"Little way south of Pidruid. Name's Vinorkis. Dealer in haigus hides." The Hjort sliced fussily at his food. After a moment he returned his attention to Valentine, letting his great fishy eyes rest fixedly on him. "You traveling with that boy?"

"Not really. I met him on my way into Pidruid."

The Hjort nodded. "Going back to Ni-moya after the festival?"

The flow of questions was becoming an annoyance. But Valentine still hesitated to be impolite even in the face of this impoliteness. "I'm not sure yet," he said.

"Thinking of staying here, then?"

Valentine shrugged. "I really have no plans at all."

"Mmm," the Hjort said. "Fine way to live."

It was impossible to tell, from the Hjort's flat nasal inflection, whether that was meant as praise or sarcastic condemnation. But Valentine hardly cared. He had sufficiently met his social responsibilities, he decided, and fell silent. The Hjort likewise seemed to have no more to say. He finished his breakfast, pushed back his chair with a squeaking screech, and in his ungainly Hjortish way lurched toward the door, saying, "Off to the marketplace now. See you around."

"Yes," Valentine answered vaguely.

Eventually Valentine wandered out into the courtyard, where now an odd

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game was in progress. Eight figures stood near the far wall, throwing daggers back and forth to one another. Six of them were Skandars, big rough shaggy beings with four arms and coarse gray pelts, and the other two were human. Valentine recognized those two as having been breakfasting when he entered the kitchen — the sleek slim dark-haired woman and a lean, hard-eyed man with eerie corpse-like white skin and long white hair. The daggers flew with astonishing speed, glittering as they flashed in the morning sun, and there was deadly serious concentration on everyone's face. No one dropped a blade, no one ever seemed to catch one by the sharp side, and Valentine could not even count the number of daggers passing back and forth; everyone appeared constantly to be throwing and catching, all hands full and more weapons traveling through the air. Jugglers, he thought, practicing their trade, getting ready to perform at the festival. The Skandars, four-armed and powerfully built, performed prodigies of coordination, but the man and the woman held their own in the patterns, juggling as deftly as the others. Valentine stood at a safe distance, watching in fascination as the daggers flew.

Then one of the Skandars grunted a "Hup!" and the pattern changed: the six aliens began to direct their weapons only at one another, doubling and redoubling the intensity with which they passed, and the two humans moved a short way apart. The girl grinned at Valentine. "Hoy, come join us!"

"What?"

"Play the game with us!" Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"A very dangerous game, I'd say."

"All the best games are dangerous. Here!" Without warning, she flipped a dagger toward him. "What's your name, fellow?"

"Valentine," he said in a sort of gasp and desperately nipped the dagger by its haft as it shot past his ear.

"Nicely caught," said the white-haired man. "Try this!"

He tossed a blade too. Valentine laughed and caught it, a little less awkwardly, and stood there with one in each hand. The aliens, wholly ignoring the by-play, continued methodically to send cascades of weapons flashing back and forth.

"Return the throw," the girl called.

Valentine frowned. He tossed it too carefully, absurdly fearful of skewering her, and the dagger described a limp arc and landed at her feet.

"You can do better," she said scornfully.

"Sorry," he said.

He threw the other with more vigor. She plucked it calmly and took another from the white-haired man and sent first one, then the other, toward Valentine. There was no time to think. Snap and snap and he caught them both. Sweat broke out on his forehead, but he was getting into the rhythm of it.

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"Here," he called. He gave one to her and took another from the white-haired one and sent a third through the air and found one coming at him and then another, and he wished that these were play daggers, blunt of blade, but he knew that they were not and he stopped fretting about it. The thing to do was to make oneself into a kind of automaton, keeping the body centered and aware, looking always toward the incoming dagger and letting the outgoing one fly of its own accord. He moved steadily, catching, throwing, catching, throwing, always one blade coming toward him and one departing. Valentine realized that a true juggler would be using both hands at once, but he was no juggler, and it was all he could manage to coordinate catching and throwing. Yet he was doing well. He wondered how soon it would be before the inevitable blunder came and he was cut. The jugglers laughed as the tempo increased. He laughed with them, easily, and went on catching and throwing for a good two or three minutes before he felt his reflexes blurring from the strain. This was the moment to stop. He caught and deliberately dropped each of the blades in turn, until all three lay at his feet, and he bent over, chuckling, slapping his thighs, breathing hard.

The two human jugglers applauded. The Skandars had not ceased their formidable whirling of blades, but now one cried another "Hup," and the sextet of aliens reeled in their daggers and moved off without a further word, disappearing in the direction of the sleeping quarters.

The young woman danced over to Valentine.

"I'm Carabella," she said. She was no taller than Shanamir and could not have been more than a few years out of girlhood. There was an irrepressible vitality bubbling within her small, muscular frame. She wore a light-green doublet of close weave and a triple strand of polished quanna-shells at her throat, and her eyes were as dark as her hair. Her smile was warm and inviting. "Where have you juggled before, fellow?" she asked.

"Never," said Valentine. He dabbed at his sweaty forehead. "A tricky sport. I don't know why I wasn't cut."

"Never?" cried the white-haired one. "Never juggled before? That was a show of natural skill and nothing else?"

"I suppose it has to be called that," Valentine said with a shrug.

"Can we believe that?" the white-haired man asked.

"I think so," Carabella said. "He was good, Sleet, but he had no form. Did you see how his hands moved after the daggers, out to here, a little nervous, a little eager, never waiting for the hafts to come to the proper place? And his throws, how hurried, how wild? No one who has been trained in the art could easily have pretended to such clumsiness, and why should he? This Valentine's eye is good, Sleet, but

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he tells the truth. He's never thrown."

"His eye is more than good," Sleet muttered. "He has a quickness I envy greatly. He has a gift."

"Where are you from?" Carabella asked.

"The east," said Valentine obliquely.

"I thought so. Your speech is somewhat odd. You come from Velathys? Kyhntor, maybe?"

"From that direction, yes."

Valentine's lack of specificity was not lost on Carabella, nor on Sleet: they exchanged glances quickly. Valentine wondered if they could be father and daughter. Probably not. There was little resemblance between them, other than their slenderness, and a juggler's life would account for that. Sleet, Valentine saw, was not nearly as old as he had seemed at first. Of middle years, yes, but hardly old; the bleached look of his skin and of his hair exaggerated his age. He was a compact, taut man with thin lips and a short, pointed white beard. A scar, barely perceptible but once no doubt quite vivid, ran across one cheek from ear to chin.

Carabells said, "We are from the south, I from Til-omon, Sleet from Narabal."

"Here to perform at the Coronal's festival?"

"Indeed. Newly hired by the troupe of Zalzan Gibor the Skandar, to help them fulfill the Pontiflex' recent decree concerning employment of humans. And you? What has brought you to Pidruid?"

"The festival," said Valentine.

"To do business?"

"Merely to see the games and parades."

Sleet laughed knowingly. "No need to be coy with us, friend. Hardly a disgrace to be selling mounts in the market. We saw you come in with the boy last night."

"No," Valentine said. "I met the young herdsman only yesterday, as I was approaching the city. The animals are his. I merely accompanied him to the inn, because I was a stranger here. I have no trade of my own."

One of the Skandars reappeared in a doorway. He was of giant size, half again as tall as Valentine, a formidable hulking creature, heavy-jawed and fierce, with narrow yellow eyes. His four arms hung well below his knees and terminated in hands like great baskets. "Come inside!" he called brusquely.

Sleet saluted and trotted off. Carabella lingered a moment, grinning at Valentine.

"You are very peculiar," she said. "You speak no lies, yet nothing you say sounds right. I think you yourself have little knowledge of your own soul. But I like you. You give off a glow, do you know that, Valentine? A glow of innocence, of simplicity, of warmth, of — of something else. I don't know." Almost shyly she touched two fingers to the side of his arm. "I do

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like you. Perhaps we'll juggle again."

And she was gone, scampering off after Sleet.

5.

He was alone, and there was no sign of Shanamir, and although he found himself wishing mightily he could spend the day with the jugglers, with Carabella, there was no way he could do that. And the morning was still young. He was without plan, and that troubled him, but not excessively. There was all of Pidruid for him to explore.

Out he went, down winding streets heavy with foliage. Lush vines and trees with thick weeping limbs sprouted everywhere, thriving in the moist warm salt air. From far away came band music, a gay if somewhat strident wheezing and pumping melody, maybe a rehearsal for the grand parade. Porters were everywhere, hauling things from the docks. A small river of foaming water rushed along the gutter, and the wildlings of Pidruid frolicked in it, mintuns and mangy dogs and little prickly nosed droles. Busy, busy, busy, a teeming city where everyone and everything, even the stray animals, had something important to do and were doing it in a hurry. All but Valentine, who stolled aimlessly, following no particular route. He paused now to peer into some dark shop festooned with bolts and swatches of fabric, now into some musty repository of spices, now into some choice and elegant garden of rich-hued blossoms sandwiched between two tall narrow buildings. Occasionally people glanced at him as though marveling that he could allow himself the luxury of sauntering.

In one street he stopped to watch children playing a game, a sort of pantomine, one little boy with a strip of golden cloth tied as a circlet around his forehead making menacing gestures in the center of a ring, and the others dancing around him, pretending to be terrified, singing:

The old King of Dreams
Sits on his throne.
He's never asleep,
He's never alone.

The old King of Dreams
Comes in the night.
If you've been bad
He'll give you a fright.

The old King of Dreams
Has a heart made of stone.
He's never asleep
He's never alone.

But when the children realized that Valentine was watching, they turned and made grotesque gestures at him, grimacing, crooking their arms, pointing. He laughed and moved on.

By midmorning he was at the waterfront. Long, elbow-angled piers thrust far out into the harbor, and every one seemed a place of mad activity. Longshoremen of four or five

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races were unloading cargo vessels that bore the arms of twenty ports on all three continents; they used floaters to bring the bales of goods down to dockside and convey them to the warehouses, but there was plenty of shouting and angry maneuvering as the immensely heavy bundles were jockeyed this way and that. As Valentine watched from the shadow of the wharf, he felt a rough thump between his shoulders and whirled to find a puffy-faced choleric Hjort pointing and waving arms. "Over there," the Hjort said. "We need six more to work the Suvraelinu ship!"

"But I'm not —"

"Quick! Hurry!"

Very well. Valtentine was not disposed to argue; he moved out onto the pier and joined a group of longshoremen who were bellowing and roaring as they guided a cargo of livestock downward. Valentine bellowed and roared among them, until the animals, squealing long-faced yearling blaves, were on their way toward the stockyard or slaughterhouse. Then he quietly slipped away and moved down the quay until he came to an idle pier.

He stood there peacefully for some minutes, staring out across the harbor toward the sea, the bronze-green whitecapped sea, squinting as though if he tried hard enough he could see around the bend of the globe to Alhanroel and its Castle Mount, rising heaven-high. But of course there was no seeing Alhanroel from here, across tens of thousands of miles of ocean, across a sea so broad that certain entire planets might conveniently be fitted between the shores of one continent and the other. Valentine looked down, between his feet, and let his imagination plummet into Majipoor's depths, wondering what lay straight through the planet from here. The western half of Alhanroel, he suspected. Possibly right now he was diametrically across the world from the lair of the Pontifex, the terrifying Labyrinth of the old and reclusive high monarch. Or perhaps, more likely, the Isle of Sleep lay downward from here, the blessed isle where the sweet Lady dwelled, in leafy glades where her priests and priestesses endlessly chanted, sending benevolent messages to the sleepers of the world. Valentine found it hard to believe that such places existed, that there were such personages in the world, such Powers, a Pontifex, a Lady of the Isle, a King of Dreams, even a Coronal, though he had beheld the Coronal with his own eyes only last night. Those potentates seemed unreal. What seemed real was the dockside at Pidruid, the inn where he had slept, the grilled fish, the jugglers, the boy Shanamir and his animals. All else was mere fantasy and mirage.

The day was warm now and growing quite humid, although a pleasant breeze blew toward shore. Valentine was hungry again. At a stand at the edge of the quay he bought, for a couple of coppers, a meal of strips of raw

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blue-fleshed fish marinated in a hot spicy sauce and served on slivers of wood. He washed it back with a beaker of fireshower wine, startling golden stuff that tasted hotter even than the sauce. Then he thought of returning to the inn. But he realized that he knew neither the name of the inn nor the name of its street. Small loss if he never found it, for he had no possessions except those he carried, but the only people he knew in all of Pidruid were Shanamir and the jugglers, and he did not want to part from them so soon.

Valentine started back and promptly lost himself in a maze of indistinguishable alleyways and streetlets that ran back and forth across Water Road. Three times he found inns that looked to be the right one, but each, when he approached it closely, proved to be some other. An hour passed, or more, and it grew to be early afternoon. Valentine understood that it would be impossible for him to find the inn, and there was a pang of sadness at that, for he thought of Carabella and the touch of her fingers to the side of his arm and the quickness of her hands as she caught the knives and the brightness of her dark eyes. But what is lost, he thought, is lost, and no use weeping it. He would find himself a new inn and new friends before dark.

And then he turned a corner and discovered what surely must be Pidruid market.

It was a vast enclosed space nearly as huge as the Golden Plaza, but there were no towering palaces and hotels with golden facades here, only an endless sprawl of tile-roofed sheds and open stockyards and cramped booths. Here was every fragrance and stink in the world, and half the produce of the universe for sale. Valentine plunged in, delighted, fascinated. Sides of meat hung from great hooks in one shed. Barrels of spice, spilling their contents, occupied another. In one stockyard were giddy spinner-birds, standing taller than Skandars on their preposterous bright legs, pecking and kicking at one another while dealers in eggs and wool bargained over them. In another were tanks of shining serpents, coiling and twisting like streaks of angry flame; nearby was a place where small sea-dragons, gutted and pithed, lay stacked for sale in foul-smelling heaps. Here was a place of public scribes, doing letters for the unlettered, and here a moneychanger deftly haggling for currencies of a dozen worlds, and here a row of sausage stands, fifty of them and identical, with identical-looking Liimen side by side tending their smoky fires and twirling their laden skewers.

And fortunetellers, and sorcerers, and jugglers, though not the jugglers Valentine knew, and in a clear space squatted a storyteller, relating for coppers some involuted and all but incomprehensible adventure of Lord Stiamot the famed Coronal of eight thousand years ago, whose deeds now were the stuff of myth. Valentine

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listened for five minutes but could make no sense of the tale, which held fifteen or twenty off-duty porters in rapture. He went on, past a booth where a golden-eyed Vroon with a silver flute played slinky tunes to charm some three-headed creature in a wicker basket, past a grinning boy of about ten who challenged him to a game involving shells and beads, past an aisle of vendors who were selling banners that bore the Coronal's starburst, past a fakir who hovered suspended over a vat of some nasty-looking hot oil, past an avenue of dream speakers and a passageway thronged with drug dealers, past the place of the interpreters and the place of the jewel sellers, and at last, after turning a corner where all manner of cheap garments were for sale, he arrived at the stockyard where mounts were sold.

The sturdy purple beasts were lined up flank to flank by the hundreds, maybe even the thousands, standing impassively and peering without interest at what appeared to be an auction taking place before their noses. Valentine found the auction as difficult to follow as the storyteller's tale of Lord Stiamot: buyers and sellers faced each other in two long rows and made hacking gestures across their wrists at one another, supplementing those movements with grimaces, the banging together of fists, and the sudden outward thrust of elbows. Nothing was said, and yet much evidently was communicated, because scribes stationed along the row constantly scribbled deeds of sale that were validated by thumb-chops in green ink, and frantic clerks affixed tags stamped with the labyrinth seal of the Pontifex to the haunches of one beast after another. Moving along the line of the auction, Valentine at last came upon Shanamir, hacking and elbowing and banging fists with consummate ferocity. In minutes it was all over; and the boy, who obviously had seen Valentine but who had made no acknowledgment of his presence, came bounding out of the line with a whoop of joy. He caught Valentine by the arm and whirled him gleefully about.

"All sold! All sold! And at a premium price!" He held out a wad of chits that a scribe had given him. "Come with me to the treasury, and then it's nothing left but play for us! How late did you sleep?"

"Late, I suppose. The inn was almost empty."

"I didn't have the heart to wake you. You were snoring like a blave. What have you been doing?"

"Exploring the waterfront, mainly. I stumbled into the marketplace while trying to get back to the inn. It was by luck I came upon you."

"Ten minutes more and you'd have missed me forever," said Shanamir. "Here. This place." He tugged at Valentine's wrist and pulled him into a long, brightly lit arcade where clerks behind wickers were changing chits into coins.

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"Give me the fifty," Shanamir murmured. "I can have it broken for you here."

Valentine produced the thick gleaming coin and stood aside while the boy joined a line. Minutes later Shanamir returned. "These are yours," he said, dumping into Valentine's outstretched purse a shower of money, some five-royal pieces and a jingle of crowns. "And these are mine," the boy said, grinning wickedly and holding up three big fifty-royal pieces of the kind he had just changed for Valentine. He popped them into a moneyband under his jerkin. "A profitable trip, it was. At festival time everyone's in a fever to spend his money fast. Come, now. Back to the inn, and let's celebrate with a flask of fireshower wine, eh? The treat's mine!"

The inn, it turned out, was no more than fifteen minutes from the market, on a street that suddenly looked familiar as they entered it. Valentine suspected that he had come within a block or two of it in his fruitless quest. No matter: he was here, and with Shanamir. The boy, relieved at being rid of his animals and excited over the price he had had for them, chattered on and on about what he would do in Pidruid before he returned to his countryside home — the dancing, the games, the drinking, the shows.

As they sat in the tavern of the inn at work on Shanamir's wine, Sleet and Carabella appeared. "May we join you?" Sleet asked.

Valentine said to Shanamir, "These are jugglers, members of a Skandar troupe here to play in the parade. I met them this morning." He made introductions. They took seats and Shanamir offered them drinks.

"Have you been to market?" said Sleet.

"Been and done," Shanamir said. "A good price."

"And now?" Carabella asked.

"The festival for a few days," said the boy. "And home to Falkynkip, I suppose." He looked a little crestfallen at the thought.

"And you?" Carabella said, glancing at Valentine. "Do you have plans?"

"To see the festival."

"And then?"

"Whatever seems right."

They were finished with the wine. Sleet gestured sharply and a second flask appeared. It was poured around generously. Valentine felt his tongue tingling with the heat of the liquor, and his head becoming a little light.

Carabella said, "Would you think to be a juggler and join our troupe, then?"

It startled Valentine. "I have no skill!"

"You have skill aplenty," said Sleet. "What you lack is training. That we could supply, Carabella and I. You would learn the trade quickly. I take an oath on it."

"And I would travel with you, and live the life of a wandering player, and go from town to town, is that it?"

"Exactly."

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Valentine looked across at Shanamir. The boy's eyes were shining at the prospect. Valentine could almost feel the pressure of his excitement, his envy.

"But what is all this about?" Valentine demanded. "Why invite a stranger, a novice, an ignoramus like me, to become one of your number?"

Carabella signaled to Sleet, who quickly left the table. She said, "Zalzan Gibor will explain. It is a necessity, not a caprice. We are short-handed, Valentine, and we have need of you." She added, "Besides, have you anything other to do? You seem adrift in this city. We offer you companionship as well as a livelihood."

A moment and Sleet returned with the giant Skandar. Zalzan Gibor was an awesome figure, massive, towering. He lowered himself with difficulty into a seat at their table; it creaked alarmingly beneath his bulk. Skandars came from some windswept, icy world far away, and though they had been settled on Majipoor for thousands of years, working in rough trades needing great strength or unusual quickness of eye, they had a way of eternally looking angry and uncomfortable in Majipoor's mild warm climate. Perhaps it was only a matter of their natural facial features, Valentine thought, but he found Zalzan Gibor and others of his kind an off-puttingly bleak tribe.

The Skandar poured himself a stiff drink with his two inner arms and spread the outer pair wide across the table as though he were taking possession of it. In a harsh rumbling voice he said, "I watched you do the knives with Sleet and Carabella this morning. You can serve the purpose."

"Which is?"

"I need a third human juggler, and in a hurry. You know what the new Coronal has lately decreed concerning public entertainers?"

Valentine smiled and shrugged.

Zalzan Gibor said, "It is foolishness and stupidity, but the Coronal is young and I suppose must let fly some wild shafts. It has been decreed that in all troupes of performers made up of more than three individuals, one third of the troupe must be Majipoori citizens of human birth, this to be effective as of this month."

"A decree like that," said Carabella, "can accomplish nothing but to set race against race, on a world where many races have lived in peace for thousands of years."

Zalzan Gibor scowled. "Nevertheless the decree exists. Some jackal in the Castle must have told this Lord Valentine that the other races are growing too numerous, that the humans of Majipoor are going hungry when we work. Foolishness, and dangerous. Ordinarily no one would pay attention to such a decree, but this is the festival of the Coronal, and if we are to be licensed to perform, we must obey the rules, however idiotic. My brothers and I have earned our keep as jugglers for years, and done no harm

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to any human by it, but now we must comply. So I have found Sleet and Carabella in Pidruid, and we are working them into our routines. Today is Twoday. Four days hence we perform in the Coronal's parade, and I must have a third human. Will you apprentice yourself to us, Valentine?"

"How could I learn juggling in four days?"

"You will be merely an apprentice," said the Skandar. "We will find something of a juggling nature for you to do in the grand parade that will disgrace neither yourself nor us. The law does not, as I see it, require all members of the troupe to have equal responsibilities or skills. But three of us must be human."

"And after the festival?"

"Come with us from town to town."

"You know nothing about me, and you invite me to share your lives?"

"I know nothing about you, and I *want* to know nothing about you. I need a juggler of your race. I'll pay your room and board wherever we go, and ten crowns a week besides. Yes?"

Carabella's eyes had an odd glint, as though she were telling him, *You can ask twice that wage and get it, Valentine.* But the money was unimportant. He would have enough to eat and a place to sleep, and he would be with Carabella and Sleet, who were two of the three human beings he knew in this city, and, he realized with some confusion, in all the world. For there was a vacancy in him where a past should be: he had hazy notions of parents, and cousins and sisters, and a childhood somewhere in eastern Zimroel, and schooling and travels, but none of it seemed real to him, nothing had density and texture and substance. And there was a vacancy in him where a future should be, too, and these jugglers promised to fill it. But yet—

"One condition," Valentine said.

Zalzan Gibor looked displeased. "Which is?"

Valentine nodded toward Shanamir. "I think this boy is tired of raising mounts in Falkynkip and may want to travel more widely. I ask that you offer him a place in your troupe as well—"

"*Valentine!*" the boy cried.

"— as groom, or valet, or even a juggler if he has the art," Valentine went on, "and that if he is willing to go with us, you accept him along with me. Will you do that?"

Zalzan Gibor was silent a moment, as if in calculation, and there was a barely audible growling sound from somewhere deep within his shaggy form. At length he said, "Have you any interest in joining us, boy?"

"Have I? *Have* I?"

"I feared as much," said the Skandar morosely. "Then it is done. We hire the both of you at thirteen crowns the week with room and board. Done?"

"Done," said Valentine.

"Done!" cried Shanamir.

Zalzan Gibor knocked back the last

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of the fireshower wine. "Sleet, Carabella, take this stranger to the courtyard and begin making a juggler out of him. You come with me, boy. I want you to have a look at our mounts."

6.

They went outside. Carabella darted off to the sleeping quarters to fetch equipment. Watching her run, Valentine took pleasure in her graceful movements, imagining the play of supple muscles beneath her garments. Sleek plucked blue-white berries from one of the courtyard vines and popped them into his mouth.

"What are they?" Valentine asked.

Sleet tossed him one. "Thokkas. In Narabal, where I was born, a thokka vine will sprout in the morning and be as high as a house by afternoon. Of course the soil bursts with life in Narabal, and the rain falls every dawn. Another?"

"Please."

With a deft quick wrist-flip Sleet chucked a berry over. It was the smallest of gestures, but effective. Sleet was an economical man, bird-light, without an ounce of excess flesh, his gestures precise, his voice dry and controlled. "Chew the seeds," he advised Valentine. "They promote virility." He managed a thin laugh.

Carabella returned, bearing a great many colored rubber balls that she juggled briskly as she crossed the yard. When she reached Valentine and Sleet, she flipped one of the balls to Valentine and three to Sleet, without breaking stride. Three she retained.

"Not knives?" Valentine asked.

"Knives are showy things. Today we deal in fundamentals," Sleet said. "We deal in the philosophy of art. Knives would be a distraction."

"Philosophy?"

"Do you think juggling's a mere trick?" the little man asked, sounding wounded. "An amusement for the gapers? A means of picking up a crown or two at a provincial carnival? It is all those things, yes, but first it is a way of life, friend, a creed, a species of worship."

"And a kind of poetry," said Carabella.

Sleet nodded. "Yes, that too. And a mathematics. It teaches calmness, control, balance, a sense of the placement of things and the underlying structure of motion. There is silent music to it. Above all there is discipline. Do I sound pretentious?"

"He means to sound pretentious," Carabella said. There was mischief in her eyes. "But everything he says is true. Are you ready to begin?"

Valentine nodded.

Sleet said, "Make yourself calm. Cleanse your mind of all needless thought and calculation. Travel to the center of your being and hold yourself there."

Valentine planted his feet flat on the ground, took three deep breaths, relaxed his shoulders so that he could not feel his dangling arms, and waited.

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"I think," said Carabella, "that this man lives most of the time at the center of his being. Or else that he is without a center and so can never be far from it."

"Are you ready?" Sleet asked.

"Ready."

"We will teach you basics, one small thing at a time. Juggling is a series of small discrete motions done one at a time, that give the appearance of constant flow and simultaneity. Simultaneity is an illusion, friend, when you are juggling and even when you are not. All events happen one at a time." Sleet smiled coldly. He seemed to be speaking from ten thousand miles away. "Close your eyes, Valentine. Orientation in space and time is essential. Think of where you are and where you stand in relation to the world."

Valentine pictured Majipoor, mighty ball hanging in space, half of it or more than half engulfed by the Great Sea. He saw himself standing rooted at Zimroel's edge with the sea behind him and a continent unrolling before him, and the Inner Sea punctuated by the Isle of Sleep, and Alhanroel beyond, rising on its nether side to the great swollen bulge of Castle Mount, and the sun overhead, yellow with a bronze-green tint, sending blistering rays down on dusty Suvrael and into the tropics, and warming everything else, and the moons somewhere on the far side of things, and the stars farther out, and the other worlds, the worlds from which his own folk had emigrated, Old Earth, fourteen thousand years ago, a small blue world absurdly tiny when compared to Majipoor, far away, half forgotten in some other corner of the universe, and he journeyed back down across the stars to this world, this continent, this city, this inn, this courtyard, this small plot of moist, yielding soil in which his boots were rooted, and told Sleet he was ready.

Sleet and Carabella stood with arms hanging straight, elbows at their sides, and brought their forearms up to a level position, cupped hands outstretched, one ball in the right hand. Valentine imitated them. Sleet said, "Pretend that a tray of precious gems rests on your hands. If you move your shoulders or elbows, or raise or lower your hands, the gems will spill. Eh? The secret of juggling is to move your body as little as possible. Things move; you control them; you remain still." The ball that Sleet held suddenly traveled from his right hand to the left, though there had not been a flicker of motion in his body. Carabella's ball did the same. Valentine, imitating, threw the ball from hand to hand, conscious of effort and movement.

Carabella said, "You use too much wrist and much too much elbow. Let the cup of your hand open suddenly. Let the fingers stretch apart. You are releasing a trapped bird — so! The hand opens, the bird flies upward."

"No wrist at all?" Valentine asked.

"Little, and conceal what you use.

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The thrust comes from the palm of your hand. So."

Valentine tried it. The shortest of upward movements of the forearm, the quickest of snaps with the wrist; propulsion from the center of his hand and from the center of his being. The ball flew to his cupped left hand.

"Yes," said Sleet. "Again."

Again. Again. Again. For fifteen minutes the three of them popped balls from one hand to the other. They made him send the ball in a neat unvarying arc in front of his face, holding it in a plane with his hands, and they would not permit him to reach upward or outward for a catch; hands waited, ball traveled. After a time he was doing it automatically. Shanamir emerged from the stables and stared, bemused, at the single-minded tossing; then he wandered away. Valentine did not halt. This hardly seemed juggling, this rigid one-ball toss, but it was the event of the moment, and he gave himself entirely up to it.

He realized eventually that Sleet and Carabella had stopped throwing, that he alone was proceeding, like a machine. "Here," said Sleet, and flipped him a thokka berry fresh from the vine. Valentine caught it between ball-tosses and held it as if thinking he might be asked to juggle with it; but, no, Sleet pantomimed that he was to eat it. His reward, his incentive.

Carabella now put a second ball in his left hand and a third next to the original one in his right. "Your hands are big," she said. "This will be easy for you. Watch me, then do as I do."

She popped a ball back and forth between her hands, catching it by making a four-pointed basket out of three fingers and the ball she held in the center of each hand. Valentine imitated her. Catching the ball was harder with a full hand than with an empty one, but not greatly so, and soon he was flawless.

"Now," said Sleet, "comes the beginning of art. We make an exchange — so."

One ball traveled in a face-high arc from Sleet's right hand to his left. As it journeyed, he made room for it in his left by popping the ball he held there upward and across, under the incoming ball, into his right. The maneuver seemed simple enough, a quick reciprocal toss, but when Valentine tried it the balls collided and went bounding away. Carabella, smiling, retrieved them. He tried again with the same result, and she showed him how to throw the first ball so it would come down on the far side of his left hand, while the other traveled inside its trajectory when he launched it rightward. It took him several tries to master it, and even after he did, he sometimes failed to make the catch, his eyes going in too many directions at once. Meanwhile Sleet, machine-like, completed exchange after exchange. Carabella drilled Valentine in the double throw for what seemed like hours, and perhaps was. He grew bored at

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first, once he was perfect at it, and then he passed through boredom into a state of utter harmony, knowing that he could throw the balls like this for a month without wearying or dropping one.

And suddenly he perceived that Sleet was juggling all three at once.

"Go on," Carabella urged. "It only *looks* impossible."

He made the shift with an ease that surprised him, and evidently surprised Sleet and Carabella too, because she clapped her hands, and he, without breaking rhythm, released a grunt of approval. Intuitively Valentine threw the third ball as the second was moving from his left hand to the right; he made the catch and returned the toss, and then he was going, a throw, a throw, a throw and a catch, a throw and a catch, a catch, a throw, always a ball on a rising arc and one descending into the waiting hand and one waiting to be thrown, and he kept it up for three, four, five interchanges before he realized the difficulty of what he was doing and broke his timing, sending all three balls spraying across the courtyard as they collided.

"You have a gift," Sleet murmured. "A definite gift."

Valentine was embarrassed by the collision, but the fact that he had dropped the balls did not appear to matter nearly as much as that he had been able to juggle them at all on the first try. He rounded them up and began again, Sleet facing him and continuing the sequence of tosses that he had never interrupted. Mimicking Sleet's stance and timing, Valentine began to throw, dropped two balls on the first try, reddened and muttered apologies, started again, and this time did not stop. Five, six, seven interchanges, ten, and then he lost count, for they no longer seemed like interchanges but all part of one seamless process, infinite and never-ending. Somehow his consciousness was split, one part making precise and accurate catches and tosses, the other monitoring the floating and descending balls, making rapid calculations of speed, angle, and rate of descent. The scanning part of his mind relayed data instantly and constantly to the part of his mind that governed the throwing and catching. Time seemed divided into an infinity of brief strokes, and yet, paradoxically, he had no sense of sequence: the three balls seemed fixed in their places, one perpetually in midair, one in each of his hands, and the fact that at each moment a different ball held one of those positions was inconsequential. Each was all. Time was timeless. He did not move, he did not throw, he did not catch; he only observed the flow, and the flow was frozen outside time and space. Now Valentine saw the mystery of the art. He had entered into infinity. By splitting his consciousness he had unified it. He had traveled to the inner nature of movement and had learned that movement was illusion and sequence an error of perception. His

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hands functioned in the present, his eyes scanned the future, and nevertheless there was only this moment of now.

And as the spiritual grandeur of it all carried him toward the heights of exaltation, Valentine perceived, with the barest flicker of his otherwise transcendent consciousness, that he was no longer standing rooted to the place, but somehow had begun to move forward, drawn magically by the orbiting balls, which were drifting subtly away from him. They were receding across the courtyard with each series of throws — and he experienced them now as a series once again, rather than as an infinite seamless continuum — and he was having to move faster and faster to keep pace with them, until he was virtually running, staggering, lurching around the yard, Sleet and Carabella scrambling to avoid him, and finally the balls were out of his reach altogether, beyond even his last desperate lunge, and bounced off in three directions.

Valentine dropped to his knees, gasping. He heard the laughter of his instructors and began to laugh with them.

"What happened?" he asked finally. "I was going so well — and then — and then —"

"Small errors accumulate," Carabella told him. "You get carried away by the wonder of it all, and you throw a ball slightly out of the true plane, and you reach forward to catch it, and the reaching causes you to make the next throw out of plane as well, and the next, and so on until everything drifts away from you, and you give chase, and in the end pursuit is impossible. It happens to everyone at the beginning. Think nothing of it."

"Pick up the balls," said Sleet. "In four days you juggle before the Coronal."

7.

He drilled for hours, going no further than the three-ball cascade but repeating it until he had penetrated the infinite a dozen times, moving from boredom to ecstasy to boredom so often that boredom itself became ecstasy. His clothing was soaked with sweat, until it clung to him like warm wet towels, and even when one of Pidruid's brief light rainshowers began, he continued to throw the balls. The rain ended and gave way to a weird twilight glow, the early evening sun masked by light fog. Still Valentine juggled. A crazy intensity overcame him. He was dimly aware of figures moving about the courtyard, Sleet, Carabella, the various Skandars, Shanamir, strangers, coming and going, but he paid no attention. He had been an empty vessel into which this art, this mystery, had been poured, and he dared not stop, for fear he would lose it and be drained and hollow once again.

Then someone came close and he was suddenly empty-handed, and he

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understood that Sleet had intercepted the balls, one by one, as they arced past his nose. For a moment Valentine's hands went on moving anyway in persistent rhythms. His eyes would not focus on anything but the plane through which he had been throwing the balls.

"Drink this," Carabella said gently and put a glass to his lips. Fireshower wine: he drank it like water. She gave him another. "You have a miraculous gift," she told him. "Not only coordination but concentration. You frightened us a little, Valentine, when you would not stop."

"By Starday you will be the best of us," said Sleet. "The Coronal himself will single you out for applause. Eh, Zalzan Gibor? What do you say?"

"I say he is soaking wet and needs clean clothes," the Skandar rumbled. He handed Sleet some coins. "Go to the bazaar, buy something that fits him before the booths close. Carabella, take him out back to the cleanser. We eat in half an hour."

"Come with me," Carabella said.

She led Valentine, who still was dazed, through the courtyard to the sleeping quarters, and behind them. A crude open-air cleanser had been rigged against the side of the building. "The animal!" she said angrily. "He could have given you a word of praise. But praise isn't his way, I suppose. He was impressed, all right."

"Zalzan Gibor?"

"Impressed, yes, astonished. But how could he praise a human? You have only two arms! Well, praise isn't his way. Here. Get out of those."

Quickly she stripped, and he did the same, dropping his soggy garments to the ground. By bright moonlight he saw her nakedness and was delighted. Her body was slim and lithe, almost boyish but for the small round breasts and the sudden flaring of the hips below her narrow waist. Her muscles lay close beneath the skin and were well developed. A flower had been tatooed in green and red on the creast of one flat buttock.

She led him under the cleanser and they stood close together as the vibrations rid them of sweat and grime. Then, still naked, they returned to the sleeping quarters, where Carabella produced a fresh pair of trousers in soft gray fabric for herself, and a clean jerkin. By then Sleet had come back from the bazaar with new clothes for Valentine: a dark-green doublet with scarlet trim, and a light cloak of blue that verged on black. It was a costume far more elegant than the one he had shed. Wearing it, he felt like one raised to some high rank and moved with conscious hauteur as he accompanied Sleet and Carabella to the kitchen.

Dinner was stew — an anonymous meat at its base, and Valentine did not dare ask — washed down with copious drafts of fireshower wine. The six Skandars sat at one end of the table, the four humans at the other, and there was little conversation. At meal's end

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Zalzan Gibor and his brothers rose without a word and strode out.

"Have we offended them?" Valentine asked.

"It is their normal politeness," said Carabella.

The Hjort who had spoken to him at breakfast, Vinorkis, now crossed the room and hovered by Valentine's shoulder, staring down in that fishy-eyed way of his: evidently it was a habit. Valentine smiled awkwardly.

Vinorkis said, "Saw you juggling in the yard this afternoon. You're pretty good."

"Thank you."

"Hobby of yours?"

"Actually, I've never done it before. But the Skandars seem to have hired me for their troupe."

The Hjort looked impressed. "Really? And will you go on tour with them?"

"So it appears."

"Whereabouts?"

"I have no idea," said Valentine. "Perhaps it hasn't even been decided yet. Wherever they want to go will be good enough for me."

"Ah, the free-floating life," Vinorkis said. "I've meant to try it myself. Perhaps your Skandars would hire me, too."

"Can you juggle?"

"I can keep accounts. I juggle figures." Vinorkis laughed vehemently and gave Valentine a hearty slap on the back. "I juggle figures! Do you like that? Well, good night to you!"

"Who was that?" Carabella asked, when the Hjort was gone.

"I met him at breakfast this morning. A local merchant, I think."

She made a face. "I don't think I like him. But it's so easy not to like Hjorts. Ugly things!" She rose gracefully and stretched. "Shall we go?"

He slept soundly again that night. To dream of juggling might have been expected, after the afternoon's events, but instead he found himself once more on the purple plain — a disturbing sign, for the Majipoori know from childhood that dreams of recurring aspect have extra significance, probably dark. The Lady rarely sends recurring dreams, but the King is given to the practice. Again the dream was a fragment. Mocking faces hovered in the sky. Whirlpools of purple sand churned alongside the path, as if creatures with busy claws and clacking palps were moving beneath. Spikes sprouted from the ground. The trees had eyes. Everything held menace, ugliness, foreboding. But the dream was without characters and without events. It communicated only sinister foreboding. That of itself was important, but Valentine could not yet grasp the meaning.

The world of dreams yielded to the world of daybreak. This time he was the first to waken, when the earliest strands of light entered the hall. Next to him Shanamir slept blissfully. Sleet lay coiled like a serpent far down the hall, and near him was Carabella, re-

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laxed, smiling in her sleep. The Skandars evidently slept elsewhere; the only aliens in the room were a couple of lumpish Hjorts and a trio of Vroons tangled in a weave of limbs that defied comprehension. From Carabella's trunk Valentine took three of the juggling balls and went outside into the misty dawn to sharpen his burgeoning skills.

Sleet, emerging an hour later, found him at it and clapped his hands. "You have the passion, friend. You juggle like one possessed. But don't tire yourself so soon. We have more complicated things to teach you today."

The morning's lesson had to do with variations on the basic position. Now that Valentine had mastered the trick of throwing three balls so that one was always in the air — and he had mastered it, no question of that, attaining in one afternoon a control of technique that Carabella said had taken her many days of practice — they had him moving about, walking, trotting, turning corners, even skipping, all the while keeping the cascade going. He juggled the three balls up a flight of stairs and down again. He juggled in a squatting position. He juggled standing on one leg like the solemn gihorna-birds of the Zimr Marsh. He juggled while kneeling. By now he was absolutely secure in the harmony of eye and hand, and what the rest of his body might be doing had no effect on that.

In the afternoon Sleet moved him to new intricacies: throwing the ball from behind his back in midvolley, throwing it up under one leg, juggling with crossed wrists. Carabella taught him how to bounce a ball against a wall and work the return smoothly into the flow, and how to send a ball from one hand to the other by letting it hit the back of his hand, instead of catching and throwing. These things he grasped swiftly. Carabella and Sleet had stopped complimenting him on the quickness of his mastery — it was patronizing to shower him constantly with praise — but he did not fail to observe the little glances of astonishment that often passed between them, and they pleased him.

The Skandars juggled in another part of the courtyard, rehearsing the act they would do in the parade, a miraculous thing involving knives and sickles and blazing torches. Occasionally Valentine glanced over, marveling at what the four-armed ones were achieving. Mainly he concentrated on his own training, though.

So went Seaday. On Fourday they began teaching him how to juggle with clubs instead of balls. This was a challenge, for, although the principles were mainly the same, clubs were bigger and clumsier, and it was necessary for Valentine to throw them higher in order to have time to make the catches. He began with one club, tossing it from hand to hand. This is how you hold it, said Carabella, this is how you throw, this is how you catch, and he did as she

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said, bending a thumb now and then but soon learning the skills. "Now," she said, "put two balls in your left hand and the club in your right," and he threw, confused for a moment by the differences in mass and spin, but not for long, and after that it was two clubs in his right hand and a ball in his left, and, late Fourday afternoon, he worked with three clubs, wrists aching and eyes tight with strain, working all the same, unwilling and almost unable to stop

That evening he asked, "When will I learn how to throw the clubs with another juggler?"

Carabella smiled. "Later. After the parade, as we travel eastward through the villages."

"I could do it now," he said.

"Not in time for the parade. You've performed wonders, but there are limits to what you can master in three days. If we had to juggle with a novice, we'd be forced to come down to your level, and the Coronal won't take much joy in that."

He admitted the justice of what she said. Still, he longed for the time when he would take part in the interplay of the jugglers and pass clubs or knives or torches with them as a member of a single many-souled entity in perfect coordination.

There was rain Fourday night, unusually heavy rain for subtropical Pidruid in summer, when quick showers were the rule, and Fiveday morning the courtyard was spongy-wet and tricky of footing. But the sky was clear and the sun was bright and hot. Barring some new reversal of the weather, the day of the parade would be flawless.

Shanamir, who had been roaming the town during the days of Valentine's training, reported that preparations for the great event were well advanced. "Ribbons and streamers and flags everywhere," he said, standing at a wary distance as Valentine began a morning warm-up with the three clubs. "And the starburst banner — they've lined the route with it — from Falkynkip Gate to Dragon Gate, and out Dragon and all along the waterfront, is what I hear, miles and miles of decoration, even cloth of gold, and green paint in the roadway. They say the cost runs to thousands of royals."

"Who pays?" Valentine asked.

"Why, the people of Pidruid," said Shanamir in surprise. "Who else? Those of Ni-moya? Those of Velathys?"

"Let the Coronal himself pay for his festival, I'd say."

"And whose money would that be, except the taxes of the whole world! Why should cities in Alhanroel pay for festivals in Zimroel? Besides, it's an honor to host the Coronal! Pidruid pays gladly. Tell me: how do you manage to throw a club and catch one at the same time with the same hand, Valentine?"

"The throw comes first, my friend. By only a little. Watch very carefully."

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"I *am* watching. I still can't figure it out."

"When we have time, after the parade's done with, I'll show you how it works."

"Where are we going after here?"

"I don't know. Eastward, Carabella told me. We'll go wherever there's a fair or carnival or a festival that will hire jugglers."

"Will I become a juggler too, Valentine?"

"If you want to. I thought you wanted to go to sea."

"I just want to travel," said Shanamir. "It doesn't have to be by sea. So long as I don't have to go back to Falkynkip. Eighteen hours a day in the stables, currying mounts — oh, no, not for me, not any more! Do you know, the night I left home I dreamed I had learned how to fly. It was a dream from the Lady, Valentine, I knew it at once, and the flying meant I would go where I hoped to go. When you told Zalzan Gibor he had to take me along if he wanted you, I trembled, I thought I was going to — going to — I felt all —" he caught himself. "Valentine, I want to be a juggler as good as you are."

"I'm not very good. I'm only a beginner." But, growing bold, Valentine threw the clubs in lower, faster arcs, showing off.

"I can't believe you just learned how on Twoday."

"Sleet and Carabella are good instructors."

"I never saw anyone learn anything so fast, though," Shanamir said. "You must have an extraordinary mind. I'll bet you were someone important before you became a wanderer, yes. You seem so cheerful, so — simple, and yet — and yet —"

"Hidden depths," Valentine said amiably, trying to throw a club from behind his back and hurling it with an agonizing crack against his left elbow. All three clubs splattered to the wet ground, and he winced and rubbed the bruise. "A master juggler," he said. "You see? Ordinarily it takes weeks of training to learn to hit your elbow like that!"

"You did it to change the subject," Shanamir said, sounding more than half serious.

8.

Starday morning, parade day, the Coronal's day, the first day of the grand festival of Pidruid, and Valentine lay curled in sleep, dreaming a quiet dream of lush green hills and limpid pools flecked with blue and yellow pond-anemones, when fingers poking in his ribs awakened him. He sat up, blinking and mumbling. Darkness: long before dawn. Carabella crouching over him: he sensed the catlike grace of her, heard her light laughter, picked up the creamy fragrance of her skin.

"Why so early?" he asked.

"To get a good place when the Coronal goes by. Hurry! Everyone's up already."

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He scrambled to his feet. His wrists were a little sore from juggling with the clubs, and he held out his arms, letting his hands loll and flop. Carabella grinned and took them in hers and looked up at him.

"You'll juggle magnificently today," she said softly.

"I hope so."

"There's no doubt of it, Valentine. Whatever you set out to do, you'll do supremely well. That's the sort of person you are."

"You know what sort of person I am?"

"Of course I do. Better than you know, I suspect. Valentine, can you tell the difference between sleeping and waking?"

He frowned. "I don't follow you."

"There are times when I think it's all the same to you, that you're living a dream, or dreaming a life. Actually I didn't think that. Sleet did. You fascinate him, and Sleet doesn't fascinate easily. He's been everywhere, he's seen much, he's seen through everything, and yet he talks constantly of you, he tries to comprehend you, to see into your mind."

"I didn't realize I was so interesting. I find myself boring."

"Others don't." Her eyes were sparkling. "Come, now. Dress, eat, off to the parade. In the morning we watch the Coronal go by, in the afternoon we perform, and at night — at night —"

"Yes? At night?"

"At night we hold festival!" she cried and sprang away from him and out the door.

In morning mist the troupe of jugglers headed for the place that Zalzan Gibor had secured for them along the grand processional highway. The Coronal's route began in the Golden Plaza where he was lodged; from there he would move eastward along a curving boulevard that led out one of the city's secondary gates, and around to the great road on which Valentine and Shanamir had entered Pidruid, the one bordered by twin columns of fire-shower palms in bloom, and thence via Falkynkip Gate back into the city, and across it down Water Road through the Arch of Dreams and out Dragon Gate to the waterfront, to the edge of the bay, where a reviewing stand had been erected in Pidruid's chief stadium. So the parade was doubled in nature: first a progress of the Coronal past the people, and then the people past the Coronal. It was an event that would last all through the day and into the night beyond and probably toward Sunday's dawn.

Because the jugglers were part of the royal entertainment, it was necessary for them to take up a position somewhere near the waterfront end of things; otherwise they would never be able to cross the congested city in time to reach the stadium for their own performance. Zalzan Gibor had obtained a choice location for them close by the Arch of Dreams, but it meant that they

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would spend the better part of the day waiting for the parade to come to them. No help for it. On foot they cut diagonally through the back streets, emerging at last at the lower end of Water Road. As Shanamir had reported, the city was lavishly decorated, cluttered with ornament, banners and bunting dangling from every building, every lightglobe. The roadbed itself had been freshly painted in the Coronal's colors, gleaming bright green bordered by golden stripes.

At this early hour the route was already lined with viewers, and no open space, but a space in the crowd swiftly was made when the Skandar jugglers appeared and Zalzan Gibor produced his sheaf of tickets. People on Majipoor normally tended to courtesy and graceful accommodation. Besides which, there were few who cared to argue points of precedence with six surly Skandars.

And then the waiting. The morning was warm and swiftly growing hot, and there was nothing for Valentine to do but stand and wait, staring at the empty highway, at the ornate black polished stonework of the Arch of Dreams, Carabella jammed up against his left side, Shanamir pushed close on the right. Time ticked infinitely slowly that morning. The wells of conversation quickly ran dry. One moment of diversion came when Valentine picked a startling phrase out of the murmur of conversation from the rows behind him:

"— can't see what all this cheering's about. I don't trust him one bit."

Valentine listened more carefully. A pair of spectators — Ghayrogs, by the slippery sound of their voices — were talking about the new Coronal, and not in any complimentary way.

" — issuing too many decrees, if you ask me. Regulating this, regulating that, getting his fingers in here and there. No need for it!"

"He wants to show that he's on the job," the other said mildly.

"No need! No need! things went along well enough under Lord Voriax, and Lord Malibor before him, without all these fussy rules. Smacks of insecurity, if you ask me."

"Quiet! Today of all days, this is no way to talk."

"If you ask me, the boy's not sure he's really Coronal yet. So he makes sure we all take notice of him. If you ask me."

"I didn't ask you." In worried tones.

"And another thing. These imperial proctors all over the place, suddenly. What's he doing? Setting up his own world-wide police? Spying for the Coronal, are they? What for? What's he up to?"

"If he's up to anything, you'll be the first one pulled in. Will you be quiet?"

"I mean no harm," the first Ghayrog said. "Look, I carry the starburst banner like everyone else! Am I loyal, or am I loyal? But I don't like the

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way things are going. It's a citizen's right to worry about the state of the realm, isn't it? If matters are not to our liking, we should speak up. That's our tradition, isn't it? If we allow small abuses now, who knows what sort of things he'll be doing five years on!"

Interesting, Valentine thought. For all this frantic cheering and waving, the new Coronal was not universally loved and admired. How many of these others, he wondered, are merely pumping up their enthusiasm out of fear or self-interest?

The Ghayrogs fell silent. Valentine scanned for other conversations, but heard nothing of interest. Again time crawled. He turned his attention to the Arch and studied it until he had memorized its features, the carved images of ancient Powers of Majipoor, heroes of the murky past, generals in the early Metamorph Wars, Coronals who antedated even legendary Lord Stiamot, Pontifexes of antiquity, Ladies offering benign blessings. The Arch, said Shanamir, was the oldest surviving thing in Pidruid and the holiest, nine thousand years old, carved from blocks of black Velathyntu marble that were immune to the ravages of the weather. To pass beneath it was to ensure the protection of the Lady and a month of useful dreams.

Rumors of the Coronal's progress across Pidruid enlivened the morning. The Coronal, it was said, had left the Golden Plaza; had entered by way of Falkynkip Gate; had paused to bestow double handfuls of ten-crown pieces in the sectors of the city inhabited primarily by Vroons and Hjorts; had stopped to comfort a wailing infant; had halted to pray at the shrine of his late brother Voriax; had found the heat too great, and was resting for some hours at midday; had done this, had done that, had done something else. The Coronal, the Coronal, the Coronal! All attention was on the Coronal this day. Valentine pondered what sort of life it must be, constantly to make grand circuits of this sort, to show oneself in city after city on eternal parade, smiling, waving, throwing coins, taking part in unending gaudy spectacle, demonstrating in one's physical person the embodiment of the power of the government, accepting all this homage, this noisy public excitement, and somehow still managing to hold the reins of the government. Or were there reins to hold? The system was so ancient it probably ran of its own accord, through an invisible bureaucracy and through time and custom. A Pontifex, old and by tradition reclusive, hidden in a mysterious Labyrinth somewhere in central Alhanroel, making the decrees by which the world was ruled, and his heir and adopted son the Coronal reigning as executive officer and prime minister from atop Castle Mount, except when he was engaged in ceremonial progresses such as this — and was either of them needed except as a symbol of majesty? This was a peaceful, sunny, playful world, so

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Valentine thought, though no doubt it had a dark side hidden somewhere, or else why would a King of Dreams have arisen to challenge the authority of the blessed Lady? These rulers, this constitutional pomp, this expense and tumult — no, Valentine thought, it had no meaning, it was a survival out of some distant era when perhaps it all had had necessity. What had meaning now? To live each day, to breathe sweet air, to eat and drink, to sleep soundly. The rest was foolishness.

"The Coronal comes!" someone cried.

So the cry had arisen, ten times in the past hour, and no Coronal had come. But now, just about noon, it seemed that in fact he was drawing near.

The sound of cheering preceded him: a distant roar, like the crashing of the sea, that spread as a propagating wave along the line of march. As it grew louder, heralds on sprightly mounts appeared in the roadway, moving almost at a gallop, managing occasional trumpet-blasts through lips that must be sore and weary after all this time. And then, mounted on a floater that carried them briskly along, several hundred of the Coronal's personal bodyguard in the green-and-gold starburst uniform, a carefully selected group, both men and women, humans and others, the cream of Majipoor, standing at attention aboard their vehicle, looking, Valentine thought, very dignified and a trifle silly.

And now the Coronal's own chariot was in sight.

It too was floater-mounted, hovering several feet above the pavement and moving quickly forward in a ghostly way. Lavishly bedecked with glittering fabric and thick white quarterings sewn from what might well have been the fur of rare beasts, it had an appropriate look of majesty and costliness. On it rode half a dozen of the high officials of the city of Pidruid and the surrounding province, all of them clad in robes of state, mayors and dukes and such; and among them, mounted on a raised platform of some silken scarlet wood, extending his arms benevolently to the onlookers on either side of the road, was Lord Valentine the Coronal, second most luminous of the Powers of Majipoor, and — since his adoptive imperial father the Pontifex was aloof and never to be seen by ordinary mortals — perhaps the truest embodiment of authority that could be beheld in this world.

"Valentine!" the cry arose. "Valentine! Lord Valentine!"

Valentine studied his royal namesake as intently as earlier he had examined the inscriptions on the ancient black Arch of Dreams. This Coronal was an imposing figure, a man of more than middle height, powerful-looking, with strong shoulders and long sturdy arms. His skin was of a rich olive hue, his hair was black and cut to fall just below his ears, his dark beard was a short stiff fringe at his chin.

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As the tumult of cheers descended on him, Lord Valentine turned graciously to one side and another, acknowledging, inclining his body slightly, offering his outstretched hands to the air. The floater drifted swiftly past the place where Valentine and the jugglers stood, and in that interval of proximity the Coronal turned toward them, so that for an electric moment Valentine and Lord Valentine had their eyes locked on one another. It seemed that a contact passed between them, a spark leaped the gap. The Coronal's smile was brilliant, his bright dark eyes held a dazzling gleam, his robes of state themselves seemed to have life and power and purpose, and Valentine stood transfixed, caught by the sorcery of imperial might. For an instant he comprehended Shanamir's awe, the awe of all these people at the presence among them of their prince. Lord Valentine was only a man, true, he needed to void his bladder and fill his gut, he slept at night and rose yawning in the morning like ordinary mortals, he had dirtied his diapers when a babe and would drool and doze when he was old; and yet, and yet, he moved in sacred circles, he dwelled on Castle Mount, he was the living son of the Lady of the Isle of Sleep and had been taken as son by the Pontifex Tyeveras, as had his brother, dead Voriax, before him, he had lived most of his life close to the founts of power, he had had given into his charge the government of all this colossal world and its teeming multitudes; and, thought Valentine, such an existence changes one, it sets one apart, it gives one an aura and a strangeness. And as the chariot of the Coronal floated by, Valentine perceived that aura and was humbled by it.

And then the chariot was past and the moment was gone, and there was Lord Valentine retreating in the distance, still smiling, still extending his arms, still nodding graciously, still flashing his brilliant gaze at this citizen and that, but Valentine no longer felt himself in the presence of grace and might. Instead he felt vaguely soiled and cheated and did not know why.

"Come quickly," Zalzan Gibor grunted. "We must get ourselves to the stadium now."

That much was simple. Everyone in Pidruid except the bedridden and the imprisoned stood stationed along the line of parade, and the auxiliary streets were empty. In fifteen minutes the jugglers were at the waterfront, in ten more they approached the huge bayside stadium. Here a crowd had already begun to form. Admission was by ticket, and tickets had long ago been distributed to the privileged, but the people of Pidruid could not get enough of the sight of their Coronal, and many thousands of them jammed the wharfs just beyond the stadium to have a second glimpse of him as he arrived.

The Skandars formed themselves into a wedge and cut brutally through

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this mob, Valentine and Sleet and Carabella and Shanamir following in their wake. Performers were instructed to report to the staging area at the stadium's rear, a great open space fronting the water, and a kind of madness already prevailed there, with hundreds of costumed artists jostling for position. Here were giant gladiators of Kwill that made even the Skandars look frail, and teams of acrobats clambering impatiently over each other's shoulders, and an entire nude corps de ballet, and three orchestras of strange outworldly instruments, tuning up in bizarre discord, and animal trainers tugging strings that controlled floater-borne beasts of improbable size and ferocity, and freaks of every description, a man who weighted a thousand pounds, a woman eleven feet high and slender as a black bamboo, a Vroon with two heads, Liimen who were triplets and joined by a rope of ghastly blue-gray flesh from waist to waist to waist, someone whose face was like a hatchet and whose lower body was like a wheel, and so much more that Valentine was dizzied by the sights and sounds and smells of this congregation of the bewildering.

Frantic clerks wearing municipal sashes were trying to arrange these performers into an orderly procession. Some sort of order of march actually existed; Zalzan Gibor barked an identification at a clerk and received in return a number that marked his troupe's place in line. But then it was their task to find their neighbors in the line, and that was not so easy, for everyone in the staging area was in constant motion and finding numbers was like trying to attach name-tags to waves in the sea.

Eventually the jugglers found their place, well back in the crowd, jammed in between a group of acrobats and one of the orchestras. After that there was no moving about, and once more they stood in place for hours. Presumably during this time the Coronal and his entourage were completing the parade and entering the stadium, and the invited spectators, a hundred thousand or more of them, were filing toward their seats. The performers were offered refreshments as they waited: servitors moved among them bearing bits of skewered meat and globelets of green or gold wine, for which no fee was asked. But the air was warm and heavy, and the reek of so many close-packed bodies of so many races and metabolisms made Valentine feel faint. In an hour, he thought, I will be juggling before the Coronal. How odd that sounds! He was aware of Carabella close beside him, jaunty, buoyant, always smiling, unfailingly energetic. "May the Divine spare us from having to do this again," she whispered, as the wait stretched on and on and the heat grew ever more intense.

At last there was some sense of movement far away near the gate to the stadium, as if some stopcock had

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been unleashed and eddy currents were drawing the first performers out of the staging area. Valentine stood on tiptoe but had no clear idea of what was happening, and the better part of an hour went by before any sort of motion was apparent at their end of the assemblage. Then the line began to go steadily forward.

From within the stadium came many sounds: music, screeching beasts, laughter, applause. The orchestra that preceded Zalzan Gibor's troupe now was ready to enter — twenty players, of three nonhuman races, bearing fanciful instruments unknown to Valentine, swirls of shining brass pipe and strange lopsided drums and small five-bodied fifes, and the like, everything oddly delicate; but the sound they made was not delicate at all when they struck up and began their march. The last of the musicians disappeared between the great double gate of the stadium and an officious major-domo strutted forward to bar the access of the jugglers.

"Zalzan Gibor and his troupe," the major-domo announced.

"We are here," said Zalzan Gibor.

"You will wait for the signal. Then you enter and follow those musicians in procession from left to right around the stadium. Do not begin to perform until you pass the large green flag that bears the Coronal's emblem. When you reach the pavilion of the Coronal, pause and make obeisance and hold your place far sixty seconds, performing your act, before moving onward. When you reach the far gate, leave the stadium and depart from the area at once. You will be paid your fee as you leave. Is everything clear?"

"Quite," said Zalzan Gibor.

The Skandar turned to his troupe. He had until this moment been nothing other than brusque and rough, but suddenly he displayed another side, for he reached three of his arms toward his brothers and clasped hands with them, and something that seemed almost like a loving smile appeared on his harsh face. Then the Skandar embraced Sleet and the Carabella, and then he drew Valentine toward him and said, as gently as a Skandar could, "You have learned quickly and you show signs of mastery. You were only a convenience for us, but I am pleased now that you are among us."

"Thank you," said Valentine solemnly.

"Jugglers!" the major-domo barked.

Zalzan Gibor said, "It's not every day that we juggle for a Power of Majipoor. Let this be our finest performance."

He gestured and the troupe moved through the mighty double gate.

The order of procession that had evolved on Fiveday afternoon had Sleet and Carabella leading the way, juggling five knives that they would exchange with one another in staccato patterns constantly varying; then, after a space, Valentine walking alone,

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juggling his three clubs with a taut intensity likely to conceal the simplicity of his routine; and, behind him, the six Skandar brothers, making utmost use of their twenty-four arms to fill the air with a preposterous miscellany of flying objects. Shanamir, as a kind of esquire, would conclude the march, making no performance, merely serving as a human punctuation mark.

So it unfolded. Carabella was exuberant, irrepressible: she did high-springs, clicking her heels, clapping her hands, and yet never missing a beat, while beside her Sleet, whiplash-quick, compact, dynamic, made himself a veritable well of energy as he snatched knives from the air and returned them to his partner. Even somber economical Sleet allowed himself a quick implausible somersault while the soft air of Majipoor under the light pull of gravity held the knives aloft for the necessary fraction of a second.

Around the stadium they marched, taking their rhythm from the strident squeaks and tootles and thumps of the orchestra before them. The vast throng, jaded already with novelty after novelty, hardly reacted, but no matter: the jugglers' allegiance was to their art, not to the sweaty faces barely visible in the distant seats. Onward they capered, and Valentine, following, gripping his clubs, reached the flag that bore the starburst and commenced.

He had devised yesterday, and privately practiced, a fancy beginning for his routine. The others knew nothing of it, for there were risks in such things for a novice, and royal performance was perhaps not the right place for a risk — although, Valentine thought, more truthfully a royal performance was the most proper place for extending oneself to the fullest.

So he grasped two of his clubs in his right hand and hurled them high, and as he did so he heard the quick grunting *"Hoy!"* of surprise from Zalzan Gibor, but there was no time to think on that, for the two clubs were descending and Valentine sent the one in his left hand up between them in a soaring double flip. Deftly he caught one falling club in each hand, sent the one in his right hand aloft, caught the double-flipped one as it dropped, and went serenely and with great relief into his familiar cascade of clubs, looking neither to the right nor the left as he trailed Carabella and Sleet around the perimeter of the gigantic stadium.

Orchestras, acrobats, dancers, animal trainers, jugglers before him and aft, thousands of blank faces in the seats, ribbon-bedecked arcades of grandees — Valentine saw none of it except in the most subliminal way. Throw, throw, throw and catch, throw and catch, throw and catch, on and on, until in the corner of his eye he saw the brilliant green and gold draperies flanking the royal pavilion. He turned to face the Coronal. This was a difficult moment, for now he had to divide his attention: keeping the clubs

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flying, he sought for Lord Valentine himself and found him, halfway up the sloping pavilion. Valentine prayed for another jolt of interchanged energy, another quick flash of contact with the Coronal's searing eyes. He threw automatically, precisely, each club rising its allotted distance and arcing over to land between his thumb and finger, and as he did so he searched the Coronal's face, but, no, no jolt of energy this time, for the prince was distracted, he did not see the juggler at all, he stared in boredom across the whole width of the stadium, toward some other act, perhaps some fang-and-claw animal number, perhaps the bare-rumped ballet-dancers, perhaps at nothing at all. Valentine persevered, counting out the full sixty seconds of his homage, and toward the end of his minute it seemed to him the Coronal did indeed glance his way a fraction of an instant but no more than that.

Then Valentine moved on. Carabella and Sleet were already approaching the exit. Valentine turned in a full circle where he stood, and grinned high-heartedly at the Skandars, who marched forward under a dancing canopy of axes and fiery torches and sickles and hammers and pieces of fruit, adding object after object to the multitude of things they whirled aloft. Valentine juggled at them a moment before continuing his solitary orbit of the stadium.

And onward and outward through the far gate. And caught his clubs and held them as he passed into the outer world. Again, as he left the presence of the Coronal, he felt a letdown, a weariness, an emptiness, as though Lord Valentine did not truly radiate energy but merely drained it from others, giving the illusion of a bright outflashing aura, and when moved beyond him one experienced only a sense of loss. Besides, the performance was over; Valentine's moment of glory had come and gone, and no one apparently had noticed.

Except Zalzan Gibor, who looked dour and irritable. "Who taught you that two-club throw?" he demanded, the moment he came through the gate.

"No one," said Valentine. "I invented it myself."

"And if you had dropped your clubs out there?"

"Did I drop them?"

"That was no place for fancy tricks," the Skandar muttered. Then he softened a bit. "But I do admit you carried yourself well."

From a second major-domo he received a purse of coins, and dumped them into his two outer hands, counting quickly through them. Most he pocketed, but he tossed one to each of his brothers, and one apiece to Sleet and Carabella, and then, after some thought, smaller coins to Valentine and Shanamir.

Valentine saw that he had received half a crown, and the others a crown apiece. Not important: money was of no real account so long as a few

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crowns jingled in his pouch. The bonus, however small, was unexpected. He would squander it gleefully tonight on strong wine and spicy fish.

The long afternoon was nearly over. Fog rising off the sea was bringing an early darkness to Pidruid. In the stadium, the sounds of circus still resounded. The poor Coronal, Valentine thought, would be sitting there far into the night.

Carabella tugged at his wrist.

"Come now," she whispered urgently. "Our work is done! Now we make festival!"

9.

She sprinted off into the crowd, and Valentine, after a moment's confusion, followed her. His three clubs, fastened by a cord to his waist, clumped awkwardly into his thighs as he ran. He thought he had lost her, but, no, she was in sight now, taking high bouncy strides, turning and grinning saucily back at him, waving him on. Valentine caught up with her on the great flat steps that led down to the bay. Barges had been towed into the near harbor, with pyres of slender logs piled on them in intricate patterns, and already, though it was hardly night yet, a few of them had been torched and were burning with a cool green glow, sending up scarcely any smoke.

The entire city had been converted, during the day, into a playground. Carnival booths had sprung up like toadstools after summer rain; revelers in strange costumes swaggered along the quays; there was music on all sides, laughter, a feverish excitement; as the darkness deepened, new fires blazed, and the bay became a sea of colored light, and out of the east erupted some kind of pyrotechnic display, a skyrocket of clear piercing brilliance that soared to a point high overhead and burst, sending dazzling streamers downward to the tips of Pidruid's highest buildings.

A frenzy was on Carabella, and a frenzy crept into Valentine too. Hand in hand they raced recklessly through the city, from booth to booth, scattering coins like pebbles as they played. Many of the booths were games of skill, knocking down dolls with balls or upsetting some carefully balanced construct. Carabella, with her juggler's eye and juggler's hand, won nearly everything she tried, and Valentine, though less skilled, took his share of prizes too. At some booths the winnings were mugs of wine or morsels of meat; at others they were silly stuffed animals or banners bearing the Coronal's emblem, and these things they abandoned. It was the show of skill that mattered, not the trifling prizes. But they ate the meat, they gulped the wine, and they grew flushed and wild as the night moved on.

"Here!" Carabella cried, and they joined a dance of Vroons and Ghayrogs and drunken Hjorts, a capering circle-dance that seemed to

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have no rules. For long minutes they pranced with the aliens. When a leathery-faced Hjort embraced Carabella, she hugged it back, clasping it so tightly that her small strong fingers sank deep into its puffy hide; and when a female Ghayrog, all snaky locks and myriad swaying breasts, pressed herself against Valentine, he accepted her kiss and returned it with more enthusiasm than he would have expected himself to muster.

And then it was onward again, into an open-walled theater where angular puppets were enacting a drama in jerky, stylized movements, and on into an arena where, at a cost of a few weights, they watched sea-dragons swim in menacing circles round and round a glistening tank, and onward from there to a garden of animate plants from Alhanroel's southern shore, ropy tentacular things and tall trembling rubbery columns with surprising eyes near their summits. "Feeding time in half an hour," the keeper called, but Carabella would not stay, and with Valentine in tow she plunged off through the gathering darkness.

Fireworks exploded again, now infinitely more effective against the backdrop of night. There was a triple starburst that gave way to the image of Lord Valentine filling half the sky, and then a dazzle of green and red and blue that took the form of the pontifical Labyrinth and yielded to the gloomy visage of old Tyeveras; and after a moment, when the colors had cleared, a new explosion threw a sheet of fire across the heavens, out of which coalesced the beloved features of the great royal mother, the Lady of the Isle of Sleep, smiling down on Pidruid with all of love. The sight of her so deeply moved Valentine that he would have fallen to his knees and wept, a mysterious and startling response, but there was no room in the crowd for any of that, and he stood trembling an instant. The Lady faded into the darkness. Valentine slipped his hand against Carabella's and held it tightly.

"I need more wine," he whispered.

"Wait. There's one more to come."

Indeed. Another skyrocket, another burst of color, this one jagged and uncouth to the eye, yellows and reds, and out of it another face, heavy-jawed and somber-eyed, that of the fourth of the Powers of Majipoor, that darkest and most ambiguous figure of the hierarchy, the King of Dreams, Simonan Barjazid. A hush fell over the crowd, for the King of Dreams was no one's friend, though all acknowledged his power, least he bring bad fortune.

Now they went for wine. Valentine's hand shook and he downed two mugs quickly, while Carabella looked at him in some concern. Her fingers played with the strong bones of his wrist, but she asked no questions. Her own wine she left barely touched.

The next door that opened before them in the festival was that of a wax museum, in the shape of a miniature

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Labyrinth, so that when they stumbled inside there was no turning back, and they gave the waxen keeper their three-weight pieces and went forward. Out of the darkness emerged heroes of the realm done in cunning simulation, moving, even speaking in archaic dialects. This tall warrior announced himself to be Lord Stiamot, conqueror of the Metamorphs; and this was the fabled Lady Thiin his mother, the warrior-Lady who in person led the defense of the Isle of Sleep when it was besieged by aborigines. To them came one claiming to be Dvorn the first Pontifex, a figure almost as remote in time from the era of Stiamot as Stiamot was from the present; and near him was Dinitak Barjazid, the first King of Dreams, a personage far less ancient, for the King of Dreams had become established in the hierarchy no more than a thousand years ago. Deeper into the maze went Carabella and Valentine, encountering a host of dead Powers, a cleverly chosen assortment of Pontifexes and Ladies and Coronals, the great rulers Confalume and Prestimion and Dekkeret, and the Pontifex Arioc of curious fame; and last of all, presiding over the exit, the image of a ruddy-faced man in tight black garments, perhaps forty years of age, black-haired and dark-eyed and smiling, and he needed to offer no introductions, for this was Voriax, the late Coronal, brother to Lord Valentine, cut down in the prime of his reign two years past, dead in some absurd hunting accident after holding power only eight years. The image bowed and reached forth its hands and exclaimed, "Weep for me, brothers and sisters, for I was supreme and perished before my time, and my fall was all the greater since I fell from so lofty a height. I was Lord Voriax, and think long on my fate."

Carabella shuddered. "A gloomy place, and a gloomy finish to it. Away from here!"

Once more she led him breathlessly through the festival grounds, through gaming halls and arcades and brilliantly lit pavilions, past dining tables and pleasure houses, never halting, floating birdlike from place to place, until finally they turned a corner and were in darkness, beyond the zone of revelry altogether. From behind them came the raucous sounds of fading merriment and the dwindling glow of garish light; as they moved forward they encountered the fragrance of heavy blossoms, the silence of trees. They were in a garden, a park.

"Come," Carabella murmured, taking him by the hand.

They entered a moonlit glade where the trees had been pleached overhead to form a tightly woven bower. Valentine's arm slipped easily around her taut narrow waist. The soft warmth of the day lay trapped under these close-tangled trees, and from the moist soil rose the creamy sweet aroma of huge fleshy flowers, bigger across than a Skandar's head. The festival

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and all its chaotic excitement seemed ten thousand miles away.

"This is where we'll stay," Carabella announced.

With exaggerated chivalry he spread his cloak, and she drew him to the ground and slid easily and swiftly into his arms. They lay secluded between two high dense bushes of gray-green sticklike branches. A stream ran not far from them and only the most slender gleams of brightness entered overhead.

Fastened to Carabella's hip was a tiny pocket-harp of intricate workmanship. She drew it forth now, strummed a brief melodious prelude, and began to sing in a cool, clear, pure voice:

My love is fair as is the spring,
As gentle as the night,
My love is sweet as stolen fruit,
My love is clear and bright.

Not all the richness of the land,
Nor all the gems of sea,
Nor all the wealth of Castle Mount
Is worth my love to me.

"How lovely that is," Valentine murmured. "And your voice — your voice is so beautiful —"

"Do you sing?" she asked.

She handed him the harp. "Sing for me, now. One of your favorites."

He turned the little instrument over in his hand, puzzled, and said after a moment, "I don't know any songs."

"No songs? No songs? Come, you must know a few!"

"All gone from my mind, so it seems."

Carabella smiled and took back her harp. "I'll teach you a few, then," she said. "But not now, I think."

"No. Not now."

He touched his lips to hers. She purred and chuckled, and her embrace grew tighter. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he could see her more clearly, small pointed face, bright sly eyes, glossy tumbling black hair. Her nostrils flared with expectation. He drew back momentarily from what was to occur, obscurely fearing that some sort of contract was about to be sealed, but then he put those fears behind him. It was festival night, and he wanted her, and she him. Valentine's hands slipped down her back, came forward, felt the cage of her ribs lying just below the skin. He remembered her as she had looked standing naked under the cleanser: muscle and bone, bone and muscle, not much meat on her except at thighs and buttocks. A compact bundle of energy. In a moment she was naked again, and so was he. He saw that she was trembling, but not from chill, not on this balmy humid night in this secret bower. A strange, almost frightening intensity seemed to grip her. He stroked her arms, her strong muscular shoulders, the small round hard-tipped spheres of her breasts. His hand found the smooth sleek skin along the

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inside of her thighs, and she let out her breath sharply and pulled him to her.

Their bodies moved in easy rhythms, as though they had been lovers for months and were well-practiced with one another. Her slender powerful legs clasped his waist and they rolled over and over, until they came almost to the edge of the stream and could feel its chilly spray on their sweaty skins. They paused there, laughing, and rolled back the other way. This time they came to rest against one of the gray-green bushes, Carabella pulling him downward, taking the thrust of his weight without difficulty.

"Now!" she cried, and he heard her hiss and moan, and then her fingers dug deep into his flesh and a furious spasm racked her body, and in that same instant he gave himself up fully to the forces that were sweeping through him.

Afterward he lay gasping and half-dazed in her embrace, listening to the booming of his own heart.

"We'll sleep here," she whispered. "No one will trouble us on this night." She stroked his forehead, pushing his soft yellow hair back from his eyes, smoothing it into place. Lightly she kissed the tip of his nose. She was casual, playful, kittenish: that dark erotic intensity was gone off from her now, burned away in the fires of passion. But he felt shaken, stunned, confused. For him there had been sudden sharp ecstasy, yes. But in that moment of ecstasy he had found himself peering through gates of dazzling light into a mysterious realm without color or form or substance, and he had teetered precariously on the brink of that unknown before tumbling back into the world of this reality.

He could not speak. Nothing he might say seemed appropriate. He had not expected such disorientation to come out of the act of love. Carabella evidently sensed the disquiet in him, for she said nothing, only held him, rocked him gently, drew his head against her breast.

In the warmth of the night he drifted gradually into sleep.

When the dream-images came, they were harsh and terrifying.

He was carried back yet again to that bleak, familiar purple plain. The same mocking faces leered at him from the purple sky, but this time he was not alone. Looming up against him was a figure of dark visage and heavy, oppressive physical presence whom Valentine understood to be his brother, although in the fierce crackling glow of the amber sun he could not clearly see the other man's features. And the dream enacted itself against a background of somber music, the low keening note of mind-music that denoted the peril-dream, the threat-dream, the death-dream.

The two men were locked in a bitter duel, and only one would come forth from the duel alive.

"Brother!" Valentine cried in shock

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and horror. "No!" He stirred and twisted and came swimming up to the surface of sleep and hovered there for an instant, close to pulling free from the deadly images that haunted him. But his training lay too deep for that. One did not flee dreams, one did not reject them no matter how appalling. One entered fully into them and accepted their guidance; one came to grips with the unthinkable in dreams, and to avoid it then meant the inevitability of confronting it, and being defeated by it, in waking life.

Deliberately Valentine drove himself downward again, through the borderland between wakefulness and sleep, and felt stealing about him once more the malign presence of his enemy, his brother.

They were armed with swords, but the contest was unequal, for Valentine's weapon was a flimsy rapier, the brother's a massive saber. Through skill and agility Valentine tried desperately to slip his sword past his brother's guard. Impossible. With slow weighty strokes the other parried steadily, sweeping Valentine's frail blade aside and driving him inexorably backward over the rough gullied terrain.

Vultures circled overhead. Out of the sky came a hissing death-song. There would be blood spilling soon, and a life returning to the Source.

Step by step Valentine yielded, knowing that a ravine lay just behind him and further retreat soon would be forestalled. His arm was aching, his eyes pounded with fatigue, there was the gritty taste of sand in his mouth, his last strength was ebbing. Backward — backward —

"Brother!" he cried in anguish. "In the name of the Divine —"

His plea was met with rough laughter and a sharp obscenity. The saber descended in a mighty swing. Valentine thrust out his blade and was shaken by a terrible body-numbing shiver as metal rang against metal and his light sword was snapped to a stump. In the same moment he tripped over a dry sand-scoured snag of wood and tumbled heavily to the ground, landing in a tangle of thorny creeping stems. The huge man with the saber reared above him, blotting out the sun, filling the sky. The death-song took on a murderous screeching intensity of timbre; the vultures fluttered and swooped.

The sleeping Valentine moaned and trembled. He turned again, huddled close against Carabella, took warmth from her as the dread cold of the death-dream enveloped him. It would be so easy to awaken now, to escape the horror and violence of these images, to swim to safety on the shores of consciousness. But, no, With fierce discipline he thrust himself again into the nightmare. The giant figure laughed. The saber rose high. The world lurched and crumbled beneath his fallen body. He commended his soul to the Lady and waited for the blow to descend.

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And the blow of the saber was awkward and lame, and with a foolish thud his brother's sword buried itself deep in the sand, and the texture and thrust of the dream were altered, for no longer did Valentine hear the wailing hiss of death-songs, and now he found everything reversed, found currents of new and unexpected energy pouring into him. He leaped to his feet. His brother tugged at the saber, cursed, struggled to pull it from the ground, and Valentine snapped it with a contemptuous kick.

He seized the other man barehanded.

Now it was Valentine who commanded the duel, and his cowering brother who retreated before a shower of blows, sagging now to his knees as Valentine battered him, growling like a wounded bear, shaking his bloody head from side to side, taking the beating and offering no defense, murmuring only, "Brother ... brother .... " as Valentine pounded him to the sand.

He lay still and Valentine stood victor over him.

Let it be dawn, Valentine prayed, and released himself from sleep.

It was still dark. He blinked and clasped his arms to his sides and shivered. Violent frenzied images, fragmented but potent, swam in his troubled mind.

Carabella studied him thoughtfully.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I dreamed."

"You cried out three times. I thought you would wake. A strong dream?"

"Yes."

"And now?"

"I'm puzzled. Troubled."

"Tell me your dream?"

It was an intimate request. And, yet, were they not lovers? Had they not gone down into the world of sleep together, partners in the night's quest? He hesitated only a moment.

"I dreamed that I fought with my brother," he said hoarsely. "That we dueled with swords in a hot barren desert, that he came close to killing me, that at the last moment I rose from the ground and found new strength and — and — and I beat him to death with my fists."

Her eyes glittered like an animal's in the darkness: she watched him like some wary beady-eyed drole and said nothing.

"Do you always have such ferocious dreams?" she asked after a time.

"I don't think so. But —"

"Yes?"

"Not only the violence. Carabella, I have no brother!"

She laughed. "Do you expect dreams to correspond exactly to reality? Valentine, Valentine, where were you taught? Dreams have a truth deeper than the reality we know. The brother of your dream could be anyone or no one: Zalzan Gibor, Sleet, your father, Lord Valentine, the Pontifex Tyeveras, Shanamir, even me.

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You know that unless they be specific sendings, dreams transform all things."

"I know, yes. But what does it mean, Carabella? To duel with a brother — to be killed, almost, by him — to slay him instead —"

"You want me to speak your dream for you?" she said, surprised.

"It speaks nothing to me except fear and mystery."

"You were badly frightened, yes. You were soaked with sweat and you cried out again and again. But painful dreams are the most revealing ones, Valentine. Speak it for yourself."

"My brother — I have no brother —"

"I told you, it doesn't matter."

"Did I make war against myself, then? I don't understand. I have no enemies, Carabella."

"Your father," she suggested.

He considered that. His father? He searched for a face that he could give to the shadowy man with the saber, but he found only more darkness.

"I don't rememberer him," Valentine said.

"Did he die when you were a boy?"

"I think so." Valentine shook his head, which was beginning to throb. "I don't remember. I see a big man — his beard is dark, his eyes are dark —"

"What was his name? When did he die?"

Valentine shook his head again.

Carabella leaned close. She took his hands in hers and said softly, "Valentine, where were you born?"

"In the east."

"Yes, you've said that. Where? What city, what province?"

"Ni-moya?" he said vaguely.

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Ni-moya," he repeated. "A big house, a garden, near the bend of the river. Yes. I see myself there. Swimming in the river. Hunting in the duke's forest. Am I dreaming that?"

"Are you?"

"It feels like — something I've read. Like a story I've been told."

"Your mother's name?"

He began to reply, but when he opened his mouth no name came.

"She die young too?"

"Galiara," Valentine said without conviction. "That was it. Galiara."

"A lovely name. Tell me what she looked like."

"She — she had —" He faltered. "Golden hair, like mine. Sweet smooth skin. Her eyes — her voice sounded like — it's so hard, Carabella!"

"You're shaking."

"Yes."

"Come. Here." Once again she drew him close. She was much smaller than he, and yet she seemed very much stronger now, and he took comfort from her closeness. Gently she said, "You don't remember anything, do you, Valentine?"

"No. Not really."

"Not where you were born or where you came from or what your parents looked like or even where you were last Starday, isn't that so? Your

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dreams can't guide you because you have nothing to speak against them." Her hands roamed his head; her fingers probed delicately but firmly into his scalp.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Looking to see if you've been hurt. A blow on the head can take the memory away, you know."

"Is there anything there?"

"No. No, nothing. No marks. No bumps. But that doesn't mean anything. It could have happened a month or two ago. I'll look again when the sun has risen."

"I like the feel of your hands touching me, Carabella."

"I like touching you," she said.

He lay quietly against her. The words that had passed between them just now troubled him intensely. Other people, he realized, had rich, full memories of their childhood and adolescence and knew the names of their parents and were sure of the place where they had been born, and he had nothing but this overlay of vague hazy notions, this mist of thin untrustworthy memories covering a well of blankness, yes, and he had known that the blankness was there but had chosen not to peer into it. Now Carabella had forced that upon him. Why, he wondered, was he unlike others? Why were his memories without substance? Had he taken some blow on the head, as she suggested? Or was it just that his mind was dim, that he lacked the capacity to retain the imprints of experience, that he had wandered for years across the face of Majipoor, erasing each yesterday as each new day dawned?

Neither of them slept again that night. Toward morning, quiet suddenly, they began to make love again, in silence, in a kind of driven purposeful way quite different from the earlier playful union; and then they rose, still saying nothing, and bathed in the chilly little brook and dressed and made their way through town to the inn. There were still some bleary-eyed revelers staggering in the streets as the bright eye of the sun rose high over Pidruid.

10.

At Carabella's prompting, Valentine took Sleet into his confidence and told him of his dream and of the conversation that followed it. The little white-haired juggler listened thoughtfully, never interrupting, looking increasingly solemn.

He said when Valentine had done, "You should seek guidance from a dream-speaker. This is too strong a sending to be ignored."

"Do you think it is a sending, then?"

"Possibly it is," said Sleet.

"From the King?"

Sleet spread his hands and contemplated his fingertips. "It could be. You will have to wait and pay close heed. The King never sends simple messages."

"It could be from the Lady just as

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well," Carabella offered. "The violence of it shouldn't deceive us. The Lady sends violent dreams when the need exists."

"And some dreams," said Sleet with a smile, "come neither from the Lady nor the King, but up out of the depths of our own foggy minds. Who can tell unaided? Valentine, see a dream-speaker.'

"Would a dream-speaker help me find my memories, then?"

"A dream-speaker or a sorcerer, yes. If dreams are no guidance to your past, nothing will be."

"Besides," said Carabella, "a dream so strong should not go unexamined. There is your responsibility to be considered. If a dream commands an action, and you choose not to pursue that action —" She shrugged. "Your soul will answer for it, and swiftly. Find a speaker, Valentine."

"I had hoped," Valentine said to Sleet, "that you would have some wisdom in these things."

"I am a juggler. Find a speaker."

"Can you recommend one in Pidruid?"

"We will be leaving Pidruid shortly. Wait until we are a few days' journey from the city. You will have richer dreams to give the speaker by then."

"I wonder if this is a sending," said Valentine. "And from the King? What business would the King of Dreams have with a wanderer like me? I hardly think it possible. With twenty billion souls on Majipoor, how could the King find time to deal with any but the most important?"

"In Suvrael," said Sleet, "at the palace of the King of Dreams, are great machines that scan this entire world and send messages into the minds of millions of people every night. Who knows how those millions are chosen? One thing they tell us when we are children, and I know it has truth: at least once before we leave this world, we will feel the touch of the King of Dreams against our spirit, each and all of us. I know that I have."

"You?"

"More than once." Sleet touched his lank coarse white hair. "Do you think I was born white-haired? One night I lay in a hammock in the jungles outside Narabal, no juggler then, and the King came to me as I slept and placed commands upon my soul, and when I awakened my hair was like this. I was twenty-three years old."

"Commands?" Valentine blurted. "What commands?"

"Commands that turn a man's hair from black to white between darkness and dawn," Sleet said. Obviously he wished to say no more. He got to his feet and glanced at the morning sky as though checking the elevation of the sun. "I think we've had enough talk for now, friend. There still are crowns to earn at the festival. Would you learn a few new tricks before Zalzan Gibor sends us out to work?"

Valentine nodded. Sleet fetched

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balls and clubs; they went out into the courtyard.

"Watch," said Sleet, and he stood close behind Carabella. She held two balls in her right hand, he one in his left, and they put their other arms around one another. "This is half-juggling," Sleet said. "A simple thing even for beginners, but it looks extremely challenging." Carabella threw; Sleet threw and caught; at once they were in the rhythm of interchange, easily passing the balls back and forth, one entity with four legs and two minds and two juggling arms. Indeed it did look taxing, Valentine thought. Sleet called out, "Feed the clubs to us now!"

Valentine did so, and as he delivered each club with a quick sharp toss to Carabella's right hand, she worked it into the sequence, one, two, three, until balls and clubs flew from her to Sleet, from Sleet to her, in a dizzying cascade. Valentine knew from his own private trials how difficult it was to deal with that many objects. Five balls would be in his compass in another few weeks, he hoped; four clubs might be feasible soon too; but to handle three of each at the same time, and coordinate this half-juggling as well, was a feat that amazed him with admiration. And some jealousy too, he realized oddly, for here was Sleet with his body tight up against Carabella's, forming a single organism with her, and only a few hours ago she had lain with him by that brook in the Pidruid park.

"Try it," Sleet said.

He stepped aside and Carabella put herself in front of Valentine, arm and arm. They worked with three balls only. At first Valentine had problems judging the height and force of his throws and sometimes sent the ball popping beyond Carabella's reach, but in ten minutes he had the knack of it and in fifteen they were working together as smoothly as if they had been doing the act for years. Sleet encouraged him with lively applause.

One of the Skandars appeared, not Zalzan Gibor but his brother Erfon, who even as Skandars went was dour and chill. "Are you ready?" he asked gruffly.

The troupe performed that afternoon in the private park of one of the powerful merchants of Pidruid, who was giving an entertainment for a provincial duke. Starday had been the great day of the festival, and the Coronal had withdrawn to some lofty retreat and would not be seen again by the ordinary folk of the city, but lesser spectacles were due to continue throughout the first half of the week, and the jugglers would be busy. Carabella and Valentine performed their new half-juggling routine; the Skandars did something flamboyant with dishes and crystal goblets and cooking pans; and, as a climax, Sleet was led forth to juggle blindfolded.

"Is this possible?" Valentine asked, awed.

"Watch!" said Carabella.

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Valentine watched, but few others did, for this was Sunday after the great Starday frenzy, and the lordlings who had ordered this performance were a weary, jaded bunch, half asleep, bored with the skills of the musicians and acrobats and jugglers they had hired. Sleet stepped forward carrying three clubs and planted himself in a firm, confident way, standing a moment with his head cocked as though listening to the wind that blows between the worlds, and then, catching his breath sharply, he began to throw.

Zalzan Gibor boomed, "Twenty years of practice, lords and ladies of Pidruid! The keenest sense of hearing is necessary for this! He detects the rustle of the clubs against the atmosphere as they fly from hand to hand!"

Valentine wondered how even the keenest sense of hearing could detect anything, against the hum of conversation and the clink of dishes and the loud ostentatious pronouncements of Zalzan Gibor, but Sleet made no errors. That the juggling was difficult even for him was obvious: normally he was smooth as a machine, tireless as a loom, but now his hands were moving in sudden sharp skips and lunges, grasping hastily at a club that was spinning up almost out of reach, snatching with desperate quickness at one that had fallen nearly too far. Still, it was miraculous juggling. It was as if Sleet had some chart in his mind of the location of each of the moving clubs and put his hand where he expected a club to fall and found it there, or close enough. He did ten, fifteen, twenty exchanges of the clubs, and then gathered all three to his chest, flipped the blindfold aside, took a deep bow. There was a pattering of applause. Sleet stood rigid. Carabella came to him and embraced him, Valentine clapped him lustily on the shoulder, and the troupe left the stage.

In the dressing room Sleet was quivering from strain and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He gulped fireshower wine without restraint, as though it were nothing. "Did they pay attention?" he asked Carabella. "Did they even notice?"

"Some did," she said gently.

Sleet spat. "Pigs! Blaves! They have not enough skill to walk from one side of a room to the other, and they sit there chattering when — when an artist — when —"

Valentine had never seen Sleet show temper before. This blind juggling, he decided, was not good for the nerves.

He seized the livid Sleet by both shoulders and leaned close into his face. "What matters," he said earnestly, "is the display of skill, not the manners of the audience. You were perfect."

"Not quite," Sleet said sullenly. "The timing —"

"Perfect," Valentine insisted. "You were in complete command. You were majestic. How could you care what drunken merchants might say or do? Is

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it for their souls or yours that you mastered the art?"

Sleet managed a weak grin. "The blind juggling cuts deep into the soul."

"I would not see you in such pain, my friend."

"It passes. I feel a little better now."

"Your pain was self-inflicted," Valentine said. "It was unwise to allow yourself such outrage. I say again: you were perfect, and nothing else is important." He turned to Shanamir. "Go out back to the kitchen and see if we might have some food. Sleet has worked too hard. He needs new fuel, and fireshower wine isn't enough."

Sleet looked merely tired now, instead of tense and furious. He reached forth a hand. "Your soul is warm and kind, Valentine. Your spirit is a gentle and sunny one."

"Your pain pained me."

"I'll guard my wrath better," Sleet said. "And you're right, Valentine: we juggle for ourselves. *They* are incidental. I should not have forgotten that."

Twice more in Pidruid Valentine saw the blind juggling done; twice more he saw Sleet stalk from a stage, rigid and drained. The attention of the onlookers, Valentine realized, had nothing to do with Sleet's fatigue. It was a demonic hard thing to do, was all, and the price the small man paid for his skill was a high one. When Sleet suffered, Valentine did what he could to beam comfort and strength to him, and there was great pleasure for Valentine in serving the other man in that way.

Twice more, too, Valentine had dark dreams. One night the apparition of the Pontifex came to him and summoned him into the Labyrinth, and inward he went, down its many passageways and incomprehensible avenues, and the image of gaunt old Tyeveras floated like a will-o'-the-wisp before him, leading him onward to the core, until at last he attained some inner realm of the great maze, and suddenly the Pontifex vanished, and Valentine stood alone in a void of cold green light, all footing gone, falling endlessly toward the center of Majipoor. And another night it was the Coronal, riding in his chariot across Pidruid, who beckoned him and invited him to a game of counters, and they threw the dice and moved the markers, and what they played with was a packet of bleached knucklebones, and when Valentine asked whose bones they were, Lord Valentine laughed and tugged at his stiff black fringe of a beard and fastened his dazzling harsh eyes on him and said, "Look at your hands," and Valentine looked, and his hands were without fingers, mere pink globes at his wrists.

These dreams Valentine shared once more with Carabella and with Sleet. But they offered him no dream-speaking, only repeated their advice that he go to some priestess of the slumber-world once they had left Pidruid.

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Departure now was imminent. The festival was breaking up; the Coronal's ships no longer stood in the harbor; the roads were crowded with the outflow, as the people of the province made their way homeward from the capital. Zalzan Gibor instructed his troupe to finish whatever business remained to be done in Pidruid that morning, for on Seaday afternoon they would take to the highway.

The announcement left Shanamir strangely quiet and dejected. Valentine noticed the boy's moodiness. "I thought you'd be eager to move along. Finding the city too exciting to leave?"

Shanamir shook his head. "I could go any time."

"Then what is it?"

"Last night a dream came to me of my father and brothers."

Valentine smiled. "Homesickness already, and you haven't even left the province?"

"Not homesickness," Shanamir said bleakly. "They were tied and lying in the road, and I was driving a team of mounts, and they cried out to me for help, and I drove right on, over their helpless bodies. One doesn't have to go to a dream-speaker for understanding of a dream like that."

"So is it guilt at abandoning your duties at home?"

"Guilt? Yes. The *money!*" Shanamir said. There was an edge on his voice, as though he were a man trying to explain something to a dull child. He tapped his waist. "The money, Valentine. I carry in here some hundred sixty royals from the sale of my animals, have you forgotten? A fortune! Enough to pay my family's way all this year and part of next! They depend on my coming back safely to Falkynkip with it."

"And you were planning not to give it to them?"

"I am hired by Zalzan Gibor, What if his route lies another way? If I bring the money home, I might never find you all again as you wander over Zimroel. If I go off with the jugglers, I steal my father's money, that he's expecting, that he needs. You see?"

"Simply enough solved," Valentine said. "Falkynkip is how far from here?"

"Two days fast, three days ordinary."

"Quite close. Zalzan Gibor's route, I'm sure, has not yet been fixed. I'll speak to him right now. One town's as good as the next to him. I'll cajole him into taking the Falkynkip road out of here. When we're close to your father's ranch, you'll slip away by night, give the money quietly to one of your brothers, slip back to us before dawn. And then no guilt will attach, and you'll be free to proceed on your way."

Shanamir's eyes widened. "You think you can win a favor from that Skandar? How?"

"I can try."

"He'll strike you to the ground in anger if you ask for anything. He wants no interference with his plans,

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any more than you'd allow a flock of blaves to vote on how you should run your affairs."

"Let me talk to him," said Valentine, "and we'll see. I have reason to think Zalzan Gibor's not as rough within as he'd like us to believe. Where is he?"

"Seeing after his wagon, readying it for the journey. Do you know where that is?"

"Toward the waterfront," Valentine said. "Yes. I know."

The jugglers traveled between cities in a fine wagon that Valentine had noticed several times, parked in a lot several blocks from the inn, for it was too broad of beam to bring down these narrow streets. It was an imposing and costly vehicle, noble and majestic, made with the finest workmanship by artisans of one of the inland provinces. The wagon's main frame was of long pale spars of light, springy wingwood, cunningly laminated into wide arching strips with a colorless fragrant glue and bound with resilient withes found in the southern marshes. Over this elegant armature sheets of tanned stick-skin had been stretched and stitched into place with thick yellow fibers dawn from the stick-creatures' own gristly bodies. The interior workmanship, Valentine suspected, was equally superb.

Approaching it now, Valentine found Erfon Gibor and another of the Skandars, Gibor Haern, diligently oiling the wagon's traces, while from within came deep booming shouts of rage, so loud and violent that the wagon seemed to sway from side to side.

"Where is your brother?" Valentine asked.

Gibor Haern nodded sourly toward the wagon. "This would not be a wise moment to intrude."

"I have business with him."

"*He* has business," said Erfon Gibor, "with the thieving little sorcerer we pay to guide us through the provinces, and who would resign our service in Pidruid just as we are making ready to leave. Go in, if you will, but you will regret it."

The angry cries from the wagon grew more vociferous. Suddenly the door of the wagon burst open and a tiny figure sprang forth, a wizened old Vroon no bigger than a toy, a doll, a little feather-light creature waist-high to Valentine, with ropy tentacular limbs and skin of a faded greenish tint and huge golden eyes now bright with fear. A smear of something that might be pale yellow blood covered the Vroon's angular cheek close beside its beak of a mouth.

Zalzan Gibor appeared an instant later, a terrifying figure in the doorway, his fur puffed with wrath, his vast basket-like hands impotently churning the air. To his brothers he cried, "Catch him! Don't let him get away!"

Erfon Gibor and Gibor Haern rose ponderously and formed a shaggy wall

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blocking the Vroon's escape. The little being, trapped, panicky, halted and whirled and threw himself against Valentine's knees.

"Lord," the Vroon murmured, clinging hard, "protect me! He is insane and would kill me in his anger!"

Zalzan Gibor said, "Hold him there, Valentine."

The Skandar came forward. Valentine pushed the cowering Vroon out of sight behind him and faced Zalzan Gibor squarely. "Control your temper, if you will. Murder this Vroon and we'll all be stuck in Pidruid forever."

"I mean no murder," Zalzan Gibor rumbled.

The Vroon said tremulously, "He *means* no murder, only to throw me against a wall with all his strength."

Valentine said, "What is the quarrel? Perhaps I can mediate."

Zalzan Gibor scowled. "This dispute does not concern you. Get out of the way, Valentine."

"Better that I don't, until your fury has subsided."

Zalzan Gibor's eyes blazed. He advanced until he was no more than a few feet from Valentine, until Valentine could smell the anger-sharpened scent of the rough-thatched Skandar. Zalzan Gibor still seethed. It might be, Valentine thought, that he will throw both of us against the wall. Erfon Gibor and Gibor Haern stared from the side: possibly they had never seen their brother defied before. There was silence a long moment. Zalzan Gibor's hands twitched convulsively, but he remained where he was.

At length he said, "This Vroon is the wizard Autifon Deliamber, whom I hire to show me the inland roads and to guard me against the deceits of the Shapeshifters. All this week he has enjoyed a holiday at my expense in Pidruid; now it is time to leave and he tells me to find another guide, that he has lost interest in traveling from village to village. Is this your sense of how contracts are kept, wizard?"

The Vroon answered, "I am old and weary and my sorceries grow stale, and sometimes I think I start to forget the road. But if you still wish it, I'll accompany you as before, Zalzan Gibor."

The Skandar looked astounded. "*What?*"

"I've changed my mind," said Autifon Deliamber blandly, letting go his fearful clutch of Valentine's legs and stepping out into view. The Vroon coiled and opened his many rubbery boneless arms, as if a dread tension were being discharged from them, and peered boldly up at the enormous Skandar. "I will keep to my contract," he declared.

Bewilderedly Zalzan Gibor said, "For an hour and a half you've been swearing you'll remain here in Pidruid, ignoring all my entreaties and even ignoring my threats, driving me into such rage that I was ready to smash you to pulp, to my own grievous harm as well as yours, for dead sorcerers

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give poor service and the jails of Pidruid are not easy to flee, and still you were stubborn, still you denied the contract and told me to make shift elsewhere for a guide. And now at a moment's notice you retract all that?"

"I do."

"Will you have the grace to tell me why?"

"No reason," said the Vroon, "except perhaps that this young man pleases me, that I admire his courage and his kindness and the warmth of his soul, and because he goes with you I will go with you again, for his sake and no other reason. Does that gratify your curiosity, Zalzan Gibor?"

The Skandar growled and sputtered in exasperation and gestured fiercely with his outer pair of hands, as though trying to pull them free of a tangle of birdnet vines. For an instant it seemed he might burst out in some new uprising of uncontrollable anger, that he was controlling himself only by supreme effort.

He said at last, "Out of my sight, wizard, before I hurl you against a wall anyway. And may the Divine guard your life if you aren't here to depart with us this afternoon."

"At the second hour after midday," Autifon Deliamber said courteously. "I will be punctual, Zalzan Gibor." To Valentine he added, "I thank you for protecting me. I am indebted to you and will make repayment sooner than you think."

The Vroon slipped quickly away.

Zalzan Gibor said after a moment, "It was a foolishness of you to come between us, Valentine. There could have been violence."

"I know. That's why I had to step between," said Valentine.

"And if I had injured you both?"

"I felt you would have held your anger. I was right, yes?"

Zalzan Gibor offered his sunless Skandar equivalent of a smile. "I held my anger, true, but only because I was so amazed at your insolence that my own surprise halted me. Another moment — or had Deliamber continued to thwart me —"

"But he agreed to honor the contract," Valentine pointed out.

"He did, indeed. And I suppose I too am indebted to you, then. Hiring a new guide might have delayed us for days. I thank you, Valentine," said Zalzan Gibor with clumsy grace.

"Is there truly a debt between us?"

The Skandar suddenly was taut with suspicion. "How do you mean?"

"I need a small favor of you. If I have done you service, may I now ask my return."

"Go on." Zalzan Gibor's voice was frosty.

Valentine took a deep breath. "The boy Shanamir is from Falkynkip. Before he takes to the road with us, he has an urgent errand to perform there. A matter of family honor."

"Let him go to Falkynkip, then, and rejoin us wherever we may be."

"He fears he won't be able to find

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us if he parts from us."

"What are you asking, Valentine?"

"That you arrange our route so that we pass within a few hours' journey of the boy's home."

Zalzan Gibor stared balefully at Valentine. In a bleak tone he said, "I am told by my guide that my contract is worthless, and then I am halted from action by an apprentice juggler, and then I am asked to plan my journey for the sake of a groom's family honor. This is becoming a taxing day, Valentine."

"If you have no urgent engagements elsewhere," said Valentine hopefully, "Falkynkip is only two or three days' journey to the northeast. And the boy —"

"Enough!" cried Zalzan Gibor. "The Falkynkip road it is. And then no more favors. Leave me now. Erfon! Haern! Is the wagon ready for the road?"

11.

The wagon of Zalzan Gibor's troupe was as splendid within as without. The floor was of dark shining planks of nightflower wood, buffed to a bright finish and pegged together with consummate artifice. To the rear, in the passenger compartment, graceful strings of dried seeds and tassels dangled from the vaulted ceiling, and the walls were covered with swirl-patterned fur hangings, intricate carved inlays, banners of gossamer-sheer fabrics. There was room for five or six people of Skandar bulk to ride back there, though not in any spacious way. Midcabin was a place for the storage of belongings, trunks and parcels and juggling gear, all the paraphernalia of the troupe; and up front, on a raised platform open to the sky, was a driver's seat wide enough for two Skandars or three humans.

Huge and princely though the wagon was, a vehicle fit for a duke or even a Coronal, it was altogether airy and light, light enough to float on a vertical column of warm air generated by mangetic rotors whirling in its belly. So long as Majipoor spun on its axis, so would the rotors, and when the rotors were spinning the wagon would drift a foot or so above the ground, and could readily be drawn along by a harnessed team of mounts.

In late morning they finished loading their goods aboard and went to the inn for lunch. Valentine was startled to see the Hjort with the orange-daubed whiskers, Vinorkis, appear at this point and take a seat beside Zalzan Gibor. The Skandar hammered on the table for attention and bellowed, "Meet our new road manager! This is Vinorkis, who will assist me in making bookings, look after our properties, and handle all manner of chores that now fall to me!"

"Oh, no," Carabella muttered under her breath. "He's hired a Hjort? That weird one who's been staring at us all week?"

Vinorkis smiled a ghastly Hjort

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smile, showing triple bands of rubbery chewing-cartilage, and peered about in a goggle-eyed way.

Valentine said, "So you were serious about joining us! I thought that was a joke, about your juggling figures."

"It is well known that Hjorts never make jokes," said Vinorkis gravely, and broke into vociferous laughter.

"But what becomes of your trade in haigus hides?"

"Sold my stock entirely at market," the Hjort replied. "And I thought of you, not knowing where you'd be tomorrow, and not caring. I admired that. I envied that. I asked myself: Are you going to peddle haigus hides all your days, Vinorkis, or will you try something new? A traveling life, perhaps? So I offered my services to Zalzan Gibor when I happened to overhear he was in need of an assistant. And here I am!"

"Here you are," said Carabella sourly. "Welcome!"

After a hearty meal they began their departure. Shanamir led Zalzan Gibor's quartet of mounts from the stable, talking softly and soothingly to the animals as the Skandars tied them into the traces. Zalzan Gibor took the reins; his brother Heitrag sat beside him, with Autifon Deliamber squeezed in along side. Shanamir, on his own mount, rode alongside. Valentine clambered into the snug, luxurious passenger compartment along with Carabella, Vinorkis, Sleet, and the other four Skandars. There was much rearranging of arms and legs to fit everyone in comfortably.

"Hoy!" Zalzan Gibor cried sharply, and it was off and out, through Falkynkip Gate and eastward down the grand highway on which Valentine had entered Pidruid just a week ago Moonday.

Summer's warmth lay heavily on the coastal plain, and the air was thick and moist. Already the spectacular blossoms of the fireshower palms were beginning to fade and decay, and the road was littered with fallen petals, like a crimson snowfall. The wagon had several windows — thin, tough sheets of stickskin, the best quality, carefully matched, perfectly transparent — and in an odd solemn silence Valentine watched Pidruid dwindle and disappear, that great city of eleven million souls where he had juggled before the Coronal and tasted strange wines and spicy foods and spent a festival night in the arms of the dark-haired Carabella.

And now the road lay open before him, and who knew what travels awaited, what adventures would befall?

Wherever the road took him would suffice. He was without plan, and open to all plans. He itched to juggle again, to master new skills, to cease being an apprentice and to join with Sleet and Carabella in the most intricate of maneuvers, and perhaps even to juggle with the Skandars themselves. Sleet

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had warned him about that: that only a master could risk juggling with them, for their double sets of arms gave them an advantage no human could hope to match. But Valentine had seen Sleet and Carabella throwing with the Skandars, and maybe in time he would do so as well. A high ambition, he thought! What more could he ask, than to become a master worthy of juggling with Zalzan Gibor and his brothers!

Carabella said, "You look so happy all of a sudden, Valentine."

"Do I?"

"Like the sun. Radiant. Light streams from you."

"Yellow hair," he said amiably. "It gives that illusion."

"No. No. A sudden smile —".

He pressed his hand against hers. "It was thinking of the road ahead. A free and hearty life. Wandering zigzag across Zimroel, and stopping to perform, and learning new routines. I want to become the best human juggler on Majipoor!"

"You stand a good chance," Sleet said. "Your natural skills are enormous. You need only the training."

"For that I count on you and Carabella."

Carabella said quietly, "And while you were thinking of juggling, Valentine, I was thinking about you."

"And I about you," he whispered, abashed. "But I was ashamed to say it aloud."

The wagon now had reached the switchbacked ridge road that led upward to the great inland plateau. It climbed slowly. In places the angles of the road were so sharp that the wagon could barely execute the turns, but Zalzan Gibor was as cunning a driver as he was a juggler, and brought the vehicle safely around each tight corner. Soon they were at the top of the ridge. Distant Pidruid now looked like a map of itself. The air up here was drier but hardly cooler, and in late afternoon the sun unleashed ghastly blasts, a mummifying heat from which there could be no escape before sundown.

That night they halted in a dusty plateau village along the Falkynkip road. A disturbing dream came to Valentine as he lay on a scratchy mattress stuffed with straw: once more he moved among the Powers of Majipoor. This time he found himself in a vast, echoing, stone-floored hall in which the Pontifex sat enthroned at one end and the Coronal at the other, and set in the ceiling was a terrifying eye of light, like a small sun, that cast a merciless white glare. Valentine bore some message from the Lady of the Isle, but he was unsure whether to deliver it to Pontifex or Coronal, and in either case was thwarted, for whichever Power he approached receded to infinity as Valentine neared. All night long he trudged back and forth over that cold slippery floor, reaching hands in supplication toward one Power or the other, and always they floated away.

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He dreamed again of Pontifex and Coronal the next night, in a town on the outskirts of Falkynkip. This was a hazy and vague dream, with no clarity of outline, and Valentine remembered nothing of it except impressions of fearsome royal personages, enormous pompous assemblies, and failures of communication. He awoke with a feeling of deep and aching discontent. On Majipoor it was a prime article of faith, to which Valentine subscribed, that dreams were no mere expression of the irrational unconscious, but actually were manifestations of the deepest truth, important messages to the soul, demonstrating ethical precepts and guiding behavior. Plainly he was receiving dreams of high consequence, but he was helpless to interpret them.

"The Powers obsess you and will not let you rest," Carabella said in the morning. "You seem tied to them by unbreakable cords. It isn't natural to dream so frequently of such mighty figures. I think surely these are sendings."

Valentine nodded. "In the heat of the day I imagine I feel the hands of the King of Dreams pressing coldly on my temples. And when I close my eyes his fingers enter my soul."

Alarm flashed in Carabella's eyes. "Can you be sure they are his sendings?"

"Not sure, no. But I think —"

"Perhaps the Lady —"

"The Lady sends kinder, softer dreams, so I believe," said Valentine. "These are sendings of the King, I much fear. But what does he want of me?"

She frowned. "In Falkynkip, Valentine, take yourself to a speaker, as you promised."

"I'll look for one, yes."

Autifon Deliamber, joining the conversation unexpectedly, said, "May I make a recommendation?"

Valentine had not seen the wizened little Vroon approach. He looked down, surprised.

"Pardon," the sorcerer said offhandedly, "I happened to overhear. You are troubled by sendings, you think?"

"They could be nothing else."

"Can you be certain?"

"I'm certain of nothing. Not even of my name, or yours, or the day of the week."

"Sendings are rarely ambiguous. When the King speaks, or the Lady, we know without doubt," Deliamber said.

Valentine shook his head. "My mind is clouded these days. I hold nothing sure. But these dreams vex me, and I need answers, though I hardly know how to frame my questions."

The Vroon reached up to take Valentine's hand with one of his delicate, intricately branched tentacles. "Trust me. Your mind may be clouded, but mine is not, and I see you clearly. My Name is Deliamber, and yours is Valentine, and this is Fiveday of the ninth week of summer, and in Falkynkip is the dream-speaker Tisana, who is my

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friend and ally, and who will help you find your proper path. Go to her and say that I give her greetings and love. Time has come for you to begin to recover from the harm that has befallen you, Valentine."

"Harm? Harm? What harm is that?"

"Go to Tisana," Deliamber said firmly.

Valentine sought Zalzan Gibor, who was speaking with some person of the village. Eventually the Skandar was done and turned to Valentine, who said, "I ask leave to spend Starday night apart from the troupe, in Falkynkip."

"Also a matter of family honor?" asked Zalzan Gibor sardonically.

"A matter of private business, May I?"

The Skandar shrugged an elaborate four-shouldered shrug. "Is something strange about you, something troublesome to me. But do as you wish. We perform in Falkynkip anyway, tomorrow, at the market fair. Sleep where you like, but be ready to leave early Sunday morning, eh?"

12.

Falkynkip was nothing in the way of being a city to compare with huge sprawling Pidruid, but all the same it was far from insignificant, a county seat that served as metropolis for a ranching district of great size. Perhaps three quarters of million people lived in and immediately about Falkynkip, and five times as many in the countryside surrounding it. But its pace was different from Pidruid's, Valentine observed. Possibly its location on this dry, hot plateau rather than along the mild and humid coast had something to do with that; but people moved deliberately here, with stolid, unhurried manners. Even in the market place things were done phlegmatically, and when the crowd gathered to attend the entertainments at the weekly fair, there was no air of great anticipation. Valentine wondered how many of these countryfolk had bothered to go down to Pidruid to behold the procession of the Coronal, or what they would do or think if the Coronal were to come to Falkynkip.

The boy Shanamir made himself scarce on Starday. He had indeed slipped off secretly the night before to his father's farm some hours north of the city, where, so he told Valentine the next morning, he had left the money he had earned in Pidruid and a note declaring that he was going off to seek adventure and wisdom, and had managed to get away again without being noticed. But he did not expect his father to take the loss of so skilled and useful a hand lightly, and, fearing that municipal proctors would be out in search of him, Shanamir proposed to spend the rest of his stay in Falkynkip hidden in the wagon. Valentine explained this to Zalzan Gibor, who agreed with his usual acrid grace.

That afternoon at the fair the jug-

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glers came marching boldly out, Carabella and Sleet leading the way, he banging a drum, she tapping a tambourine and singing a lilting jingle:

Spare a royal, spare a crown,
Gentlefolk, come sit ye down.
Astonishment and levity —
Come and see our jugglery!

Spare an inch and spare a mile,
Gentlefolk, we'll make you smile.
Cup and saucer, ball and chair,
Dancing lightly in the air!

Spare a moment, spare a day,
And we'll spin your cares away.
A moment's time, a coin well spent,
Will bring you joy and wonder ment.

But levity and wonderment were far from Valentine's spirit that day, and he juggled poorly. He was tense and uneasy from too many nights of troubled sleep, and also was inflamed with ambitions that went beyond his present skills, which led him to overreach himself. Twice he dropped clubs, but Sleet had shown him ways of pretending that that was part of the routine, and the crowd seemed forgiving. Forgiving himself was a harder matter. He crept off sullenly to a wine-stand while the Skandars took the center of the stage.

From a distance he watched them working, the six huge shaggy beings weaving their twenty-four arms in precise and flawless patterns. Each juggled seven knives while constantly throwing and receiving other knives, and the effect was spectacular, the tension extreme, as the silent interchange of sharp weapons went on and on. The placid burghers of Flakynkip were spellbound.

Valentine had little liking for his Skandar employers, but he had the highest respect for their art: even a master juggler like Sleet was capable of matching few of the Skandar skills. Watching them, Valentine regretted all the more his own faulty performance. Since Pidruid he had yearned to go before an audience again — his hands had twitched for the feel of clubs and balls — and he had finally had his moment and had been clumsy. No matter. There would be other marketplaces, other fairs. All across Zimroel the troupe would wander, year after year, and he would shine, he would dazzle audiences, they would cry out for Valentine the juggler, they would demand encore after encore, until Zalzan Gibor himself looked black with jealousy. A king of jugglers, yes, a monarch, a Coronal of performers! Why not? He had the gift. Valentine smiled. His dour mood was lifting. Was it the wine, or his natural good spirits reasserting themselves? He had been at the art only a week, after all, and look what he had achieved already! Who could say what wonders of eye and hand he would perform when he had had a year or two of practice?

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Autifon Deliamber was at his side. "Tisana is to be found in the Street of Watermongers," the diminutive sorcerer said. "She expects you shortly."

"Have you spoken to her of me."

"No," said Deliamber.

"But she expects me. Hah! Is it by sorcery?"

"Something of that," the Vroon said, giving a Vroonish wriggle of the limbs that amounted to a shrug. "Go to her soon."

Valentine nodded. He looked across: the Skandars were done, and Sleet and Carabella were demonstrating one-arm juggling. How elegantly they moved together, he thought. How calm, how confident they were, how crisp of motion. And how beautiful she is. Valentine and Carabella had not been lovers since the night of the festival, though sometimes they had slept side by side; it was a week, now, and he had felt aloof and apart from her, though nothing but warmth and support had come from her to him. These dreams were the problem, draining and distracting him. To Tisana, then, for a speaking, and then, perhaps tomorrow, to embrace Carabella again —

"The Street of Watermongers," he said to Deliamber. "Very well. Will there be a sign marking her dwelling?"

"Ask," Deliamber said.

As Valentine set out, the Hjort Vinorkis stepped out from behind the wagon and said, "Off for a night on the town, are you?"

"An errand," Valentine said.

"Want some company?" The Hjort laughed his coarse, noisy laugh. "We could hit a few taverns together, hoy? I wouldn't mind getting away from all this jugglery for a few hours."

Uneasily Valentine said, "It's the sort of thing one must do by oneself."

Vinorkis studied him a moment. "Not too friendly, are you?"

"Please. It's exactly as I said: I must do this alone. I'm not going tavern-crawling tonight, believe me."

The Hjort shrugged. "All right. Be like that, see if I care. I just wanted to help you have fun — show you the town, take you to a couple of my favorite places —"

"Another time," said Valentine quickly.

He strode off quickly toward Falkynkip.

The Street of Watermongers was easy enough to find — this was an orderly town, no medieval maze like Pidruid, and there were neat and comprehensible city maps posted at every major intersection — but finding the home of the dream-speaker Tisana was a slower business, for the street was long; and those he asked for directions merely pointed over their shoulders toward the north. But he followed along steadfastly and by early evening reached his goal, a small gray rough-shingled house in a residential quarter far from the marketplace. It bore on its weatherworn front door two symbols of the Powers, the crossed lightning

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bolts that stood for the King of Dreams, and the triangle-within-triangle that was the emblem of Lady of the Isle of Sleep.

Tisana was a sturdy woman of more than middle years, heavy-bodied and of unusual height, with a broad strong face and cool searching eyes. Her hair, thick and unbound, black streaked with swathes of white, hung far down her shoulders. Her arms, emerging bare from the gray cotton smock that she wore, were solid and powerful, although swinging dewlaps of flesh hung from them. She seemed a person of great strength and wisdom.

She greeted Valentine by name and bade him be comfortable in her house.

"I bring you, as you must already know, the greetings and love of Autifon Deliamber," he said.

The dream-speaker nodded gravely. "He has sent advance word, yes. That rascal! But his love is worth receiving, for all his tricks. Convey the same from me to him." She moved around the small, dark room, closing draperies, lighting three thick red candles, igniting some incense. There was little furniture, only a high-piled woven rug in tones of gray and black, a venerable wooden table on which the candles stood, and a tall clothes-cabinet in antique style. She said, as she made her preparations, "I've known Deliamber nearly forty years, would you believe it? It was in the early days of the reign of Tyeveras that we met, at a festival in Piplok, when the new Coronal came to town, Lord Malibor that drowned on the sea-dragon hunt. The little Vroon was tricky even then. We stood there cheering Lord Malibor in the streets, and Deliamber said, 'He'll die before the Pontifex, you know,' the way someone might predict rain when the south wind blows. It was a terrible thing to say, and I told him so. Deliamber didn't care. A strange business, when the Coronal dies first, when the Pontifex lives on and on. How old d'ye think Tyeveras is by now? A hundred? A hundred twenty?"

"I have no idea," said Valentine.

"Old, very old. He was Coronal a long while before he entered the Labyrinth. And he's been in there for three Coronal-reigns, can you imagine? I wonder if he'll outlive Lord Valentine too." Her eyes came to rest on Valentine's. "I suppose Deliamber knows that, too. Will you have wine with me now?"

"Yes," Valentine said, uncomfortable with her blunt, outgoing manner and with the sense she gave him of knowing far more about him than he knew himself.

Tisana produced a carven stone decanter and poured two generous drinks, not the spicy fireshower wine of Pidruid but some darker, thicker vintage, sweet with undertastes of peppermint and ginger and other, more mysterious, things. He took a quick sip, and then another, and after the second she said casually, "It contains the drug, you know."

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"Drug?"

"For the speaking."

"Oh, of course. Yes." His ignorance embarrassed him. Valentine frowned and stared into his goblet. The wine was dark red, almost purple, and its surface gave back his own distorted reflection by candlelight. What was the procedure, he wondered? Was he supposed now to tell his recent dreams to her? Wait and see, wait and see. He drained the drink in quick uneasy gulps and immediately the old woman refilled, topping off her own glass, which she had barely touched.

She said, "A long time since your last speaking?"

"Very long, I'm afraid."

"Evidently. This is the moment when you give me my fee, you know. You'll find the price somewhat higher then you remember."

Valentine reached for his purse. "It's been so long —"

"—that you don't remember. I ask fifty crowns now. In Lord Voriax' time it was thirty-five, and when I first took up speaking, in the reign of Lord Malibor, I got twenty or twenty-five. Is fifty a burden for you?"

It was a month's pay for him from Zalzan Gibor, above his room and board; but he had arrived in Pidruid with plenty of money in his purse, he knew not how or why, close on sixty royals, and much of that remained. He gave the dream-speaker half a royal and she dropped the coin negligently into a green procelain bowl on the table. He yawned. She was watching him closely. He drank again; she did also and refilled; his mind was growing cloudy. Though it was still early at night, he would soon be sleepy.

"Come now to the dream-rug," she said, blowing out two of the three candles.

She pulled off her smock and was naked before him.

That was unexpected. did dream-speaking involve some sort of sexual contact? With this old woman? Not that she seemed so old, now: her body looked a good twenty years younger than her face, not a girl's body by any means, but still firm-fleshed, plump but unwrinkled, with full heavy breasts and strong smooth thighs. Perhaps these speakers were some sort of holy prostitutes, Valentine thought. She beckoned to him to undress, and he cast his clothes aside. They lay down together on the thick woolen rug in the half-darkness, and she drew him into her arms, but there was nothing at all erotic about the embrace — more maternal, if anything, an all-enfolding engulfment. He relaxed. His head was against her soft warm breasts and it was hard for him to stay awake. The scent of her was strong in his nostrils, a sharp pleasant aroma like that of the gnarled and ageless needle-trees that grow on the high peaks of the north just below the snow-line, an odor that was crisp and pungent and clean. She said softly, "In the kingdom of dreams the only language spoken is that of

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truth. Be without fear as we embark together."

Valentine closed his eyes.

High peaks, yes, just below the snow-line. A brisk wind blew across the crags, but he was not at all cold, though his feet were bare against the dry stony soil. A trail lay before him, a steeply sloping path in which broad gray flagstones had been laid to form a gigantic staircase leading downward into a mist-wrapped valley, and without hesitation Velentine started the descent. He understood that these images were not yet those of his dream, only of the prelude, that he had only begun his night's journey and was still merely on the threshold of sleep. But as he went downward he passed others making the ascent, figures familiar to him from recent nights, the Pontifex Tyeveras with parchment skin and withered face, laboring up the steps in feeble quavering manner, and Lord Valentine the Coronal clambering with bold assertive strides, and dead Lord Voriax floating serenely just above the steps, and the great warrior-Coronal Lord Stiamot out of eight thousand years past, brandishing some mighty staff around the tip of which furious storms swirled, and was this not the Pontifex Arioc who had resigned the Labyrinth six thousand years before to proclaim himself a woman and become Lady of the Isle of Sleep instead? And this the great ruler Lord Confalume, and the equally great Lord Prestimion who had succeeded him, under whose two long reigns Majipoor had attained its peak of wealth and power. And then came Zalzan Gibor with the wizard Deliamber on his back, and Carabella, naked and nut-brown, sprinting with unfailing vigor, and Sleet, juggling balls of fire as he climbed, and Shanamir, and a Liiman selling sizzling sausages, and the gentle sweet-eyed Lady of the Isle, and the old Pontifex again, and the Coronal, and a platoon of musicians, and twenty Hjorts bearing the King of Dreams, terrible old Simonan Barjazid, in a golden litter, and the mists were thicker down here, the air more dank; and Valentine found his breath coming in short painful bursts, as though instead of descending from the heights, he had been climbing all the time, working his way by awful struggle above the line of needle-trees, into the bare granite shields of the high mountains, barefoot on burning strands of snow, swaddled in gray blankets of cloud that concealed all of Majipoor from him.

There was noble austere music in the heavens now, awesome choirs of brass playing solemn and somber melodies suitable for the robing-ceremony of a Coronal. And, indeed, they were robing him, a dozen crouching servants placing on him the cloak of office and the starburst crown, but he shook his head lightly and brushed them away, and with his own hands he removed the crown and handed it to his brother of the menacing saber, and shrugged off his fine robes and distrib-

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uted them in strips to the poor, who used them to make bindings for their feet, and word went out to all the provinces of Majipoor that he had resigned his high office and given up all power, and once more he found himself on the flagstone steps, descending the mountain trail, seeking that valley of mists that lay in the unattainable beyond.

"But why do you go downward?" asked Carabella, blocking his path, and he had no answer to that, so that when little Deliamber pointed upward again he shrugged meekly and began a new ascent, through fields of brilliant red and blue flowers, through a place of golden grass and lofty green cedars, and he perceived that this was no ordinary peak he had been climbing and descending and climbing anew, but rather Castle Mount itself, that jutted thirty miles into the heavens, and his goal was that bewildering all-encompassing ever-expanding structure at its summit, the place where the Coronal dwelled, the castle that was called Lord Valentine's Castle but that had, not long before, been Lord Voriax' Castle and before that Lord Malibor's Castle, and in older times Lord Dekkeret's Castle and Lord Prestimion's Castle and Lord Confalume's Castle, Lord Arioc's, Lord Thimin's, all those mighty princes who had ruled from Castle Mount, putting their own imprints to the growing castle and giving their names to it while they lived there, all the way back to Lord Stiamot the conquerer of the Metamorphs, he who was the first to dwell on Castle Mount and built the modest keep out of which all the rest had sprouted. I will regain the Castle, Valentine told himself, and I will take up residence.

But what was this? Workmen by the thousands, dismantling the enormous edifice! The work of demolition was well under way, and all the outer wings were taken apart, the place of buttresses and arches that Lord Voriax had built, and the grand trophy room of Lord Malibor, and the great library that Tyeveras had added in his days as Coronal, and much else, all those rooms now mere piles of bricks laid in neat mounds on the slopes of the Mount; and they were working inward toward more ancient wings, to the garden house of Lord Confalume and the armory of Lord Dekkeret and the archive vault of Lord Prestimion, removing those places brick by brick by brick like locusts sweeping over the fields at harvest time. "Wait!" Valentine cried. "No need to do this! I am back, I will take up my robes and crown once again!" But the work of destruction continued, and it was as if the castle were made of sand and the tides were sweeping in, and a gentle voice said, "Too late, too late, much too late," and the watch tower of Lord Arioc was gone, and the parapets of Lord Thimin were gone, and the observatory of Lord Kinniken was gone with all its star-watching apparatus, and Castle Mount itself was shudder-

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ing and swaying as the removal of the castle disrupted its equilibrium, and workmen now were running frantically with bricks in their hands, seeking flat places on which to stack them, and a dread eternal night had come and baleful stars swelled and writhed in the sky, and the machineries that held back the chill of space atop Castle Mount were failing, so that the warm mild air was flowing moonward, and there was sobbing in the depths of the planet, and Valentine stood amid the scenes of disruption and gathering chaos, holding forth outstretched fingers to the darkness.

The next thing he knew, morning light was in his eyes, and he blinked and sat up, confused, wondering what inn this was and what he had been doing the night before, for he lay naked on a thick woolly rug in a warm strange room, and there was an old woman moving about, brewing tea, perhaps —

Yes. The dream-speaker Tisana, and this was Falkynkip, on the Street of Watermongers —

His nakedness discomforted him. He rose and dressed quickly.

Tisana said, "Drink this. I'll put some breakfast up, now that you're finally awake."

He looked dubiously at the mug she handed him.

"Tea," she said. "Nothing but tea. The time for dreaming is long past."

Valentine sipped at it while she bustled around the small kitchen. There was a numbness in his spirit, as though he had caroused himself into insensibility and now had a reckoning to pay; and he knew there had been strange dreams, but yet he felt none of the malaise of the soul that he had known upon awakening these past few mornings, only that numbness, a curious centered calmness, almost an emptiness. Was that the purpose of visiting a dream-speaker? He understood so little. He was like a child loose in this vast and complex world.

They ate in silence. Tisana seemed to be studying Valentine intently across the table. Last night she had chattered much before the drug had had its effect, but now she seemed subdued, reflective, almost withdrawn, as if she needed to be apart from him while preparing to speak his dream.

At length she cleared the dishes and said, "How do you feel?"

"Quiet within."

"Good. Good. That's important. To go away from a dream-speaker in turmoil is a waste of money. I had no doubts, though. Your spirit is strong."

"Is it?"

"Stronger than you know. Reverses that would crush an ordinary person leave you untouched. You shrug off disaster and whistle in the face of danger."

"You speak very generally," Valentine said.

"I am an oracle, and oracles are never terribly specific," she replied lightly.

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"Are my dreams sendings? Will you tell me that, at least?"

She was thoughtful a moment. "I am uncertain."

"But you shared them! Aren't you able to know at once if a dream comes from the Lady or the King?"

"Peace, peace, this is not so simple," she said, waving a palm at him. "Your dreams are not sendings of the Lady, this I know."

"Then if they are sendings, they are of the King."

"Here is the uncertainty. They have an aura of the King about them in some way, yes, but not the aura of sendings. I know you find that hard to fathom: so do I. I do believe the King of Dreams watches your doings and is concerned with you, but it doesn't seem to me that he's been entering your sleep. It confounds me."

"Has anything like this been known to you before?"

The dream-speaker shook her head. "Not at all."

"Is this my speaking, then? Only more mysteries and unanswered questions?"

"You haven't had the speaking yet," Tisana answered.

"Forgive my impatience."

"No forgiveness is needed. Come, give me your hands, and I'll make a speaking for you." She reached for him across the table and grasped and held him, and after a long while said, "You have fallen from a high place, and now you must begin to climb back to it."

He grinned. "A high place?"

"The highest."

"The highest place on Majipoor," he said lightly, "is the summit of Castle Mount. Is *that* where you would have me climb?"

"There, yes."

"A very steep ascent you lay upon me. I could spend my entire life reaching and climbing that place."

"Nevertheless, Lord Valentine, that ascent awaits you, and it is not I who lays it on you."

He gasped at her use of the royal title to him and then burst out laughing at the grossness of it, the tastelessness of her joke. "Lord Valentine! Lord Valentine? No, you do me far too much honor, Madame Tisana. Not *Lord* Valentine. Only Valentine, Valentine the juggler, is all, the newest of the troupe of Zalzan Gibor the Skandar."

Her gaze rested steadily on him. Quietly she said, "I beg your pardon. I meant no offense."

"How could it offend me? But put no royal titles on me, please. A juggler's life is royal enough for me, even if my dreams may sometimes be high-flown ones."

Her eyes did not waver. "Will you have more tea?" she asked.

"I promised the Skandar I'd be ready for departure early in the morning, and so I must leave soon. What else does the speaking hold for me?"

"The speaking is over," said Tisana.

Valentine had not expected that.

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He was awaiting interpretations, analysis, exegesis, counsel. And all he had had from her —

"I have fallen and I must climb back on high. That's all you tell me for half a royal?"

"Fees for everything grow larger nowadays," she said without rancor. "Do you feel cheated?"

"Not at all. This has been valuable for me, in its fashion."

"Politely said, but false. Nevertheless, you have received value here. Time will make that clear to you." She got to her feet, and Valentine rose with her. There was about her an aura of confidence and strength. "I wish you a good journey," she said, "and a safe ascent."

13.

Autifon Deliamber was the first to greet him when he returned from the dream-speaking. In the quiet of dawn the little Vroon was practicing a sort of juggling near the wagon, with shards of some glittering icy-bright crystalline substance: but this was wizard-juggling, for Deliamber only pretended to throw and catch, and appeared actually to be moving the shards by power of mind alone. He stood beneath the brilliant cascade and the shimmering slivers coursed through the air in a circle above him like a wreath of bright light, remaining aloft although Deliamber never touched them.

As Valentine approached, the Vroon gave a twitch of his tentacle-tips and the glassy shards fell instantly inward to form a close-packed bundle that Deliamber snatched deftly from the air. He held them forth to Valentine. "Pieces of a temple building from the Ghayrog city of Dulorn, that lies a few days' journey east of here. A place of magical beauty, it is. Have you been there?"

The enigmas of the dream-speaking night still lay heavy on Valentine, and he had no taste for Deliamber's flamboyant spirit this early in the morning. Shrugging, he said, "I don't remember."

"You'd remember, if you had. A city of light, a city of frozen poetry!" The Vroon's beak clacked: a Vroonish sort of smile. "Or perhaps you wouldn't remember. I suppose not: so much is lost to you. But you'll be there again soon enough."

"Again? I never was there."

"If you were there once, you'll be there again when we get there. If not, not. However it may be for you, Dulorn is our next stop, so says our beloved Skandar." Deliamber's mischievous eyes probed Valentine's. "I see you learned a great deal at Tisana's."

"Let me be, Deliamber."

"She's a marvel, isn't she?"

Valentine attempted to go past. "I learned nothing there," he said tightly. "I wasted an evening."

"Oh, no, no, no! Time is never wasted. Give me your hand, Valentine." The Vroon's dry, rubbery tentacle slipped around Valentine's reluct-

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ant fingers. Solemnly Deliamber said, "Know this, and know it well: *time is never wasted.* Wherever we go, whatever we do, everything is an aspect of education. Even when we don't immediately grasp the lesson."

"Tisana told me approximately the same thing as I was leaving," Valentine murmured sullenly. "I think you two are in conspiracy. But what did I learn? I dreamed again of Coronals and Pontifexes. I climbed up and down mountain trails. The dream-speaker made a silly, tiresome joke on my name. I rid myself of half a royal better spent on wine and feasting. No, I achieved nothing." He attempted to withdraw his hand from Deliamber's grip, but the Vroon held him with unexpected strength. Valentine felt an odd sensation, as of a chord of somber music rolling through his mind, and somewhere beneath the surface of his consciousness an image glimmered and flashed, like some sea-dragon stirring and sounding in the depths, but he was unable to perceive it clearly: the core of the meaning eluded him. Just as well. He feared to know what was stirring down there. An obscure and incomprehensible anguish flooded his soul. For an instant it seemed to him that the dragon in the depths of his being was rising, was swimming upward through the murk of his clouded memory toward the levels of awareness. That frightened him. Knowledge, terrifying and menacing knowledge, was hidden within him and now was threatening to break loose. He resisted. He fought. He saw little Deliamber staring at him with terrible intensity, as if trying to lend him the strength he needed to accept that dark knowledge, but Valentine would not have it. He pulled his hand free with sudden violent force and went lurching and stumbling toward the Skandar wagon. His heart was pounding fiercely, his temples throbbed, he felt weak and dizzy. After a few uncertain steps he turned and said angrily, "What did you do to me?"

"I merely touched my hand to yours."

"And gave me great pain!"

"I may have given you access to your own pain," said Deliamber quietly. "Nothing more than that. The pain is carried within you. You have been unable to feel it. But it's struggling to awaken within you, Valentine. There's no preventing it."

"You have no choice but to heed the voices from within. The struggle has already begun."

Valentine shook his aching head. "I want no pain and no struggles. I've been a happy man, this last week."

"Are you happy when you dream?"

"These dreams will pass from me soon. They must be sendings intended for someone else."

"Do you believe that, Valentine?"

Valentine was silent. After a moment he said, "I want only to be allowed to be what I want to be."

"And that is?"

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"A wandering juggler. A free man. Why do you torment me this way, Deliamber?"

"I would gladly have you be a juggler," the Vroon said gently. "I mean you no sorrow. But what one wants often has little connection with what may be marked out for one on the great scroll."

"I will be a master juggler," said Valentine, "and nothing more than that, and nothing less."

"I wish you well," Deliamber said courteously and walked away.

Slowly Valentine let his breath escape. His entire body was tense and stiff, and he squatted and put his head down, stretching out first his arms and then his legs, trying to rid himself of these strange knots that had begun to invade him. Gradually he relaxed a little, but some residue of uneasiness remained, and the tension would not leave him. He wondered if he would ever again be the light-hearted Valentine of the Pidruid days, who had gone here and there and here and done as he pleased, who had juggled before a Coronal and thousands of onlookers and thought nothing of it. These tortured dreams, these squirming dragons in his soul, these portents and omens —

Carabella emerged from the wagon and stood above him as he stretched and twisted. "Let me help," she said, crouching down beside him. She pushed him forward until he lay sprawled flat, and her powerful fingers dug into the taut muscles of his neck and back. Under her ministrations he grew somewhat less tense, yet his mood remained dark and troubled.

"The speaking didn't help you?" she asked softly.

"No."

"Can you talk about it?"

"I'd rather not," he said.

"Whatever you prefer." But she waited expectantly, her eyes alert, shining with warmth and compassion.

He said, "I barely understood the things the woman was telling me. And what I understood I can't accept. But I don't want to talk about it."

"Whenever you do, Valentine, I'm here. Whenever you feel the need to tell someone —"

"I don't want to, not right now. Perhaps never." He sensed her reaching toward him, eager to heal the pain in his soul as she had grappled with the tensions in his body. He could feel the love flooding from her to him. Valentine hesitated. He did battle within himself. Haltingly he said, "The things the speaker told me —"

"Yes."

No. To talk of these things was to give them reality, and they had no reality, they were absurdities, they were fantasies, they were foolish vapors.

"— were nonsense," Valentine said. "What she said isn't worth discussing."

Carabella's eyes reproached him. He looked away from her.

"Can you accept that?" he asked roughly. "She was a crazy old woman

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and she told me a lot of nonsense, and I don't want to discuss it, not with you, not with anyone. It was *my* speaking. I don't have to share it. I —" He saw the shock on her face. In another moment he would be babbling. He said in an entirely different tone of voice, "Get the juggling balls, Carabella."

"Now?"

"Right now."

"I want you to teach me the exchange between jugglers, the passing of the balls. Please."

"We're due to leave in half an hour!"

"Please," he said urgently.

She nodded and sprinted up the steps of the wagon, returning a moment later with the balls. They moved apart, to an open place where they would have room, and Carabella flipped three of the balls to him. She was frowning.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Learning new techniques when the mind is troubled is never a good idea."

"It might calm me," he said. "Let's try."

"As you wish." She began to juggle the three balls she held, by way of warming up. Valentine imitated her, but his hands were cold, his fingers unresponsive, and he had trouble doing this simplest of all routines, dropping the balls several times. Carabella said nothing. She continued to juggle while he launched one abortive cascade after another. His temper grew edgy. She would not tell him again that this was the wrong moment for attempting such things, but her silence, her look, even her stance, all said it more forcefully than words. Valentine desperately sought to strike a rhythm. *You have fallen from a high place,* he heard the dream-speaker saying, *and now you must begin to climb back to it.* He bit his lip. How could he concentrate, with such things intruding? Hand and eye, he thought, hand and eye, forget all else. Hand and eye. *Nevertheless, Lord Valentine, that ascent awaits you, and it is not I who lays it on you.* No. No. No. No. His hands shook. His fingers were rods of ice. He made a false move and the balls went scattering.

"Please, Valentine," Carabella said mildly.

"Get the clubs."

"It'll be even worse with them. Do you want to break a finger?"

"The clubs," he said.

Shrugging, she gathered up the balls and went into the wagon. Sleet emerged, yawned, nodded a casual greeting to Valentine. The morning was beginning. One of the Skandars appeared and crawled under the wagon to adjust something. Carabella came out bearing six clubs. Behind her was Shanamir, who gave Valentine a quick salute and went to feed the mounts. Valentine took the clubs. Conscious of Sleet's cool eyes on him, he put himself into the juggling position, threw one club high, and botched the catch. No one spoke. Valentine

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tried again. He managed to get the three clubs into sequence, but for no more than thirty seconds; then they spilled, one landing unpleasantly on his toe. Valentine caught sight of Autifon Deliamber watching the scene from a distance. He picked up the clubs again. Carabella, facing him, patiently juggled her three, studiously ignoring him. Valentine threw the clubs, got them started, dropped one, started again, dropped two, started yet again, made a faulty grab and bent his left thumb badly out of place.

He tried to pretend that nothing had gone wrong. Once more he picked up the clubs, but this time Sleet came over and took Valentine lightly by both wrists.

"Not now," he said. "Give me the clubs."

"I want to practice."

"Juggling isn't therapy. You're upset about something, and it's ruining your timing. If you keep this up you can do damage to your rhythms that will take you weeks to undo."

Valentine tried to pull free, but Sleet held him with surprising strength. Carabella, impassive, went on juggling a few feet away. After a moment Valentine yielded. With a shrug he surrendered the clubs to Sleet, who scooped them up and took them back into the wagon. A moment later Zalzan Gibor stepped outside, elaborately scratched his pelt fore and aft with several of his hands as though searching in it for fleas, and boomed, "Everybody in! Let's move it along!"

14.

The road to the Ghayrog city of Dulorn took them eastward through lush, placid farming country, green and fertile under the eye of the summer sun. Like much of Majipoor this was densely populated terrain, but intelligent planning had created wide agricultural zones bordered by busy strip-cities, and so the day went, through an hour's worth of farms, an hour's worth of town, an hour of farms, an hour of town. Here in the Dulorn Rift, the broad sloping lowland east of Falkynkip, the climate was particularly suited for farming, for the Rift was open at its northern end to the plar rainstorms that constantly drenched Majipoor's temperate Arctic, and the subtropical heat was made moderate by gentle, predictable precipitation. The growing season lasted year-round: this was the time for harvesting the sweet yellow stajja tubers, from which a bread was made, and for planting such fruits as niyk and glein.

The beauty of the landscape lightened Valentine's bleak outlook. By easy stages he ceased to think about things that did not bear thinking about and allowed himself to enjoy the unending procession of wonders that was the planet of Majipoor. It was an ever-changing panorama of colors and textures. Here, the black slender trunks of niyk trees planted in rigid and complex geometrical patterns danced against

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the horizon; there, teams of Hjort and human farmers in rural costumes moved like invading armies across the stajja fields, plucking the heavy tubers; now the wagon glided quietly through a district of lakes and streams, and now through one where curious blocks of white granite jutted tooth-fashion from the smooth grassy plains.

At midday they entered a place of particularly strange beauty, one of the many public forest preserves. At the gateway a sign glowing with green luminosity proclaimed:

BLADDERTREE PRESERVE

Located here is an outstanding virgin tract of Dulorn Bladdertree. These trees manufacture lighter-than-air gases which keep their upper branches buoyant. As they approach maturity their trunks and root systems atrophy, and they become epiphytic in nature, dependent almost entirely on the atmosphere for nourishment. Occasionally in extreme old age a tree will sever its contact with the ground entirely and drift off to found a new colony far away. Bladdertrees are found both in Zimroel and Alhanroel but have become rare in recent times. This grove set aside for the people of Majipoor by official decree, 12th. Pont. Confalume Cor. Lord Prestimion.

The jugglers followed the forest trail silently on foot for some minutes without seeing anything unusual. Then Carabella, who had led the way, passed through a thicket of dense blue-black bushes and cried out suddenly in surprise.

Valentine ran to her side. She was standing in wonder in the midst of marvels.

The bladdertrees were everywhere, in all stages of their growth. The young ones, no higher than Deliamber or Carabella, were curious ungainly looking shrublets with thick, swollen branches of a peculiar silvery hue that emerged at awkward angles from squat fleshy trunks. But in trees fifteen or twenty feet tall, the trunks had begun to attenuate and the limbs to inflate, so that now the bulging boughs appeared top-heavy and precarious; and in even older trees the trunks had shriveled to become nothing more than rough, scaly guy ropes by which the trees' buoyant crowns were fastened to the ground. High overhead they floated and bobbed in the gentlest breeze, leafless, turgid, the branches puffed up like balloons. The silvery color of the young branches became, in maturity a brilliant translucent gleam, so that the trees seemed like glass models of themselves, shining brightly in the shafts of sunlight through which they danced and weaved. Even Zalzan Gibor seemed moved by the strangeness and beauty of the trees. The Skandar approached one of the tallest, its gleaming swollen crown floating far overhead,

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and carefully, almost reverently, encircled its taut narrow stem with his fingers. Valentine thought Zalzan Gibor might be minded to snap the stem and send the bladdertree floating away like a glittering kite, but, no, the Skandar seemed merely to be marking the slenderness of the stem, and after a moment he stepped back, muttering to himself.

For a long while they wandered among the bladdertrees, studying the little ones, observing the stages of growth, the gradual narrowing of the trunks and bloating of the limbs. The trees were without leaves and no flowers were apparent: it was difficult to believe that they were vegetable creation at all, so vitreous did they seem. It was a place of magic. The darkness of his earlier mood now seemed a mystery to Valentine. On a planet where such beauty abounded, how could one have any need for brooding or fretting?

"Here," Carabella called. "Catch!"

She had gauged the change in his spirits and had gone to the wagon for the juggling balls. Now she threw three of them to him, and he went easily into the basic cascade, and she the same, in a clearing surrounded by glistening bladdertrees. Shanamir and Sleet and two of the Skandars squatted down to watch.

Carabella stood facing him, just a few feet away. They juggled independently for three or four minutes, until a symmetry of phase encompassed them and they were throwing in identical rhythms. Now they juggled together, mirroring one another, Valentine feeling a deeper calmness settling over him with each cycle of throws: he was balanced, centered, tuned. The bladdertrees, stirring lightly in the wind, showered him with dazzles of refracted light. The world was silent and serene.

"When I tell you," Carabella said quietly, "throw the ball from your right hand to my left, at precisely the height you'd throw it if you were giving it to yourself. One ... two ... three ... four ... five ... *pass!*" And on *pass* he threw to her on a firm straight arc, and she to him. He managed, barely, to catch the incoming ball and work it into the rhythm, continuing his own cascade, and counting off until it was time to pass again. Back — forth — *pass* —

It was hard at first, the hardest juggling he had ever done, but yet he could do it, he was doing it without blundering, and after the first few passes he was doing it without awkwardness, smoothly exchanging throws with Carabella as though he had practiced this routine with her for months. He knew that this was extraordinary, that no one was supposed to master intricate patterns like this on the first try; but, as before, he moved swiftly toward the core of the experience, placed himself in a region where nothing existed but hand and eye and the moving balls, and failure became not merely impossible but inconceivable.

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"Hoy!" Sleet cried. "Over here!"

He too was juggling. Momentarily Valentine was baffled by this multiplication of the task, but he forced himself to remain in automatic mode, to throw when it seemed appropriate, to catch what came to him, and constantly to keep the balls that remained to him moving between his hands. So when Sleet and Carabella began to exchange balls, he was able to stay in the pattern and catch from Sleet instead of Carabella. "One — two — one — two —" Sleet called, taking up a position between Valentine and Carabella and making himself the leader of the group, feeding the balls first to one, then to the other, in a rhythm that remained rock-steady for a long while and then accelerated comically to a pace far beyond Valentine's abilities. Suddenly there were dozens of balls in the air, or so it seemed, and Valentine grasped wildly at all of them and lost them all and collapsed, laughing, onto the warm springy turf.

"So there are some limits to your skill, eh?" Sleet said gaily. "Good! Good! I was beginning to worry whether you were mortal."

Valentine chuckled. "Mortal enough, I fear. A good thing those weren't the clubs you were throwing, or I'd be picking up teeth now."

"Lunch!" Deliamber called.

He presided over a pot of stew hanging from tripod above a glow-globe. The Skandars, who had been doing some practice of their own in another part of the grove, appeared as if conjured from the soil and helped themselves with ungracious eagerness. Valentine and Carabella were the last to be served, but he hardly cared. He was sweating the good sweat of exertion well exerted, and his blood was pounding and his skin was tingling, and his long night of unsettling dreams seemed far behind him, something he had left in Falkynkip.

All that afternoon the wagon sped eastward. This was definitely Ghayrog country now, inhabited almost exclusively by that glossy-skinned reptilian-looking race. When nightfall came the troupe was still half a day's journey from the provincial seat at Dulorn, where Zalzan Gibor had arranged some sort of theatrical booking. Deliamber announced that a country inn lay not far ahead, and they went on until they came to it.

"Share my bed," Carabella said to Valentine.

In the corridor going to their chamber they passed Deliamber, who paused a moment, touching their hands with tentacle-tips and murmuring, "Dream well."

"Dream well," Carabella repeated automatically.

But Valentine did not offer the customary response with her, for the touch of the Vroon sorcerer's flesh to his had set the dragon stirring within his soul again, and he was disquieted and grave, as he had been before the miracle of the bladdertree grove. It was

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as though Deliamber had appointed himself the enemy of his tranquility, arousing in him inarticulate fears and apprehensions against which he had no defense. "Come," Valentine muttered hoarsely to Carabella.

"In a hurry, are you?" She laughed, a light tinkling laugh, but it died away quickly when she saw his expression. "Valentine, what is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"May I be allowed moods, as other human beings sometimes have?"

"When your face changes like that, it's like a shadow passing over the sun. And so suddenly —"

"Something about Deliamber," Valentine said, "disturbs and alarms me. When he touched me —"

"Deliamber's harmless. Mischievous, like all wizards, especially Vroonish ones, especially small ones. There's dark mischief in very small people. But you have nothing to fear from Deliamber."

"Truly so?" He closed the door, and she was in his arms.

"Truly," she said. "You have nothing to fear from anyone, Valentine. Everyone who sees you loves you. There's no one who would injure you in this world."

"How good to believe that," he said, as she drew him down on the bed.

They embraced, and his lips touched hers gently, and then with more force, and soon their bodies were entwined. He had not had her for over a week, and he had looked forward to it with intense longing and delight, but the incident in the hallway had robbed him of desire, had left him as numb and isolated as he had been for most of the nights since Pidruid, and that mystified and depressed him. Carabella must have sensed the coolness in him, but evidently she chose to ignore it, for her lithe energetic body sought his with fervor and passion. He forced himself to respond, and then after a minute he was no longer forcing, was nearly as enthusiastic as she, but still he stood outside his own sensations, a mere spectator as they made love. It was over quickly, and the light was out, although moonlight entering their window cast a harsh chilly glow over their faces.

"Dream well," Carabella murmured.

"Dream well," he replied.

She was asleep almost at once. He held her, keeping her warm slim body close against him, feeling no sleepiness himself. After a time he rolled away and drew himself into his favorite sleep position, on his back, arms folded across his chest, but no sleep came, only fitful light hazy dreamless dozing, easily broken. He diverted himself by counting blaves, by imagining himself juggling in patterns of surpassing intricacy with Sleet and Carabella, by trying to relax his entire body one muscle at a time. Nothing worked. Wide awake, he propped himself on one arm

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and lay looking down at Carabella, lovely in the moonlight.

She was dreaming. A muscle flickered in her cheek; her eyes moved fitfully beneath their lids; her breasts rose and fell in jagged rhythms; she put her knuckles to her lips, murmured something in a thick unintelligible voice, drew her knees tightly to her chest. Her lean bare form looked so beautiful that Valentine wanted to reach out to her, to stroke her cool thighs, to touch his lips lightly to her small rigid nipples, but, no, it was uncouth to interrupt a dreamer, it was an unforgivable breach of civility. So he was content to watch her and to love her from afar and to savor the reawakened desire that he felt, while nevertheless regretting that it had not been upon him when they were embracing.

Carabella cried out in terror.

Her eyes opened, but she saw nothing — the sign of a sending. A shudder went rippling the length of her body. She trembled and turned to him, still asleep, still dreaming, and he held her while she whimpered and moaned, giving her dream-service, dream-comfort, protecting her against the darkness of the spirit by the strength of his arms, and at last the fury of her dream ran its course and she relaxed, limp, sweat-soaked, against his chest.

She lay still for some moments, until Valentine thought she had fallen peacefully asleep. No. She was awake, but motionless, as if contemplating her dream, confronting it, trying to carry it upward into the realm of wakefulness as she had been trained. Suddenly she sat upright and gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes were wild and glassy.

"My lord!" she whispered. She backed away from him, scuttling across the bed in a strange crablike crawl, holding one arm folded above her breasts and the other as a kind of shield across her face. Her lips were quivering. Valentine reached for her, but she pulled away in horror and threw herself to the rough wooden floor, where she crouched in an eerie huddle, folded inward on herself as if trying to conceal her nakedness.

"Carabella?" he said, bewildered.

She looked up at him. "Lord — lord — please — let me be, lord —"

And bowed again, and made the starburst with her fingers, the two-handed gesture of obeisance that one makes only when one comes before the Coronal.

15.

Wondering whether it might be he, and not she who had been dreaming, and the dream still going on, Valentine rose, found a robe for Carabella to wear, put on one of his own garments. Still she crouched apart from him, stunned and shattered. When he tried to comfort her she pulled away, huddling still deeper into herself.

"What is it?" he asked. "What happened, Carabella?"

"I dreamed — I dreamed that you

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were — " She faltered. "So real, so terrible —"

"Tell me. I'll speak your dream for you, if I can."

"It needs no speaking. It speaks of itself." She made the starburst sign at him again. In a cold, low, inflectionless voice she said, "I dreamed that you were the true Coronal Lord Valentine, that had been robbed of your power and all your memory, and set into another's body, and turned loose near Pidruid to roam and live an idle life while someone else ruled in your stead."

Valentine felt himself at the edge of a great abyss, and the ground crumbling beneath his feet.

"Was this a sending?" he asked.

"It was a sending. I know not from whom, Lady or King, but it was no dream of mine, it was something that was placed in my mind from outside. I saw you, lord —"

"Stop calling me that."

"— atop Castle Mount, and your face was the face of the other Lord Valentine, the dark-haired one we juggled for, and then you came down from the Mount to travel on the grand processional in all the lands, and while you were in the south, in my own city of Til-omon, it was, they gave you a drug and seized you in your sleep and changed you into this body and cast you out, and no one was the wiser that you had been magicked out of your royal powers. And I have touched you, lord, and shared your bed, and been familiar with you in a thousand ways, and how will I be forgiven, lord?"

"Carabella?"

She cowered and trembled.

"Look up, Carabella. Look at me."

She shook her head. He knelt before her and touched his hand to her chin. She shuddered as though he had marked her with acid. Her muscles were rigid. He touched her again.

"Raise your head," he said gently. "Look at me."

She looked up, slowly, timidly, the way one might look into the face of the sun, fearing the brightness.

He said, "I am Valentine the juggler and nothing more."

"No, lord."

"The Coronal is a dark-haired man, and my hair is golden."

"I beg you, lord, let me be. You frighten me."

"A wandering juggler frightens you?"

"It is not who you are that frightens me. The person you are is a friend I have come to love. It is *who you have been*, lord. You have stood beside the Pontifex and tasted the royal wine. You have walked in the highest rooms of Castle Mount. You have known the fullest power of the world. It was a true dream, lord, it was as clear and real as anything I have ever seen, a sending beyond doubt, not to be questioned. And you are rightful Coronal, and I have touched your body and you have touched mine, and it is sacrilege

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a thousand times over for an ordinary woman like me to approach a Coronal so closely. And I will die for it."

Valentine smiled. "If I was ever Coronal, love, it was in another body, there's nothing holy about the one you embraced. But I was never Coronal."

Her gaze rested squarely on him. Her tone was less quavering as she said, "You remember nothing of your life before Pidruid. You were unable to tell me your father's name, and you told me of your childhood in Ni-moya and didn't believe it yourself, and you guessed at a name for your mother. Is this not true?"

Valentine nodded.

"And Shanamir has told me you had much money in your purse, but had no idea what any of it was worth, and tried a pay a sausage man with a fifty-royal piece. True?"

He nodded again.

"As though you had lived all your life at court, perhaps, and never handled money? You know so little, Valentine! You have to be taught — like a child."

"Something has happened to my memory, yes. But does that make me Coronal?"

"The way you juggle, so naturally, as though all skills are yours if you want them — the way you move, the way you hold yourself, the radiance that comes from you, the sense you give everyone that you were born to hold power —"

"Do I give that?"

"We have talked of little else, since you came among us. That you must be a fallen prince, some exiled duke perhaps. But then my dream — it leaves no doubt, lord —"

Her face was white with strain. For a moment she had overcome her awe, but only for a moment, and now she trembled again. And the awe was contagious, it seemed, for Valentine himself began to feel fear, a coldness of the skin. Was there truth in any of this? Was he an anointed Coronal that had touched hands with Tyeveras in the heart of the Labyrinth and at the summit of Castle Mount?

He heard the voice of the dreamspeaker Tisana. *You have fallen from a high place, and now you must begin to climb back to it,* she had said. Impossible. Unthinkable. *Nevertheless, Lord Valentine, that ascent awaits you, and it is not I who lays it on you.* Unreal. Impossible. And yet his dreams, that brother who would have slain him, and whom he had slain instead, and those Coronals and Pontifexes moving through the chambers of his soul, and all the rest. Could it be? Impossible. Impossible.

He said, "You mustn't fear me, Carabella."

She shivered. He reached for her and she shied away, crying, "No! Don't touch me! — My lord — "

Tenderly he said, "Even if I was once Coronal, — and how strange and foolish that sounds to me, — even if, Carabella, I am Coronal no longer, I

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am not in any anointed body, and what has taken place between us is no sacrilege. I am Valentine the juggler now, whoever I may have been in a former life."

"You don't understand, lord."

"I understand that a Coronal is a man like any other, only he bears more responsibilities than others, but there is nothing magical about him and nothing to fear except his power, and I have none of that. If ever I had."

"No," she said. "A Coronal is touched by the highest grace, and it never goes from him."

"Anyone can be Coronal, given the right training and the right cast of mind. One isn't bred for it. Coronals have come from every district of Majipoor, every level of society."

"Lord, you don't understand. To have been Coronal is to be touched by grace. You have ruled, you have walked on Castle Mount, you have been adopted into the line of Lord Stiamot and Lord Dekkeret and Lord Prestimion and all the others, you are brother to Lord Voriax, you are *the son of the Lady of the Isle*. And I am to think of you as an ordinary man? I am to have no fear of you?"

He stared at her in shock.

He remembered what had gone through his own mind when he stood in the streets and beheld Lord Valentine the Coronal in the procession, and had felt himself in the presence of grace and might, and had realized that to be Coronal was to become a being set apart, a personage of aura and strangeness, one who holds power over twenty billions, who carries in himself the energies of thousands of years of famed princes, who is destined to go on to the Labyrinth one day and wear the authority of the Pontifex. Incomprehensible as all this was to him, it was sinking in, and he was dumfounded and overwhelmed by it. But it was absurd. To fear himself? To sink down in awe at his own imaginary majesty? He was Valentine the juggler, and nothing more!

Carabella was sobbing. In another moment she would be hysterical. The Vroon, surely, would have some sleeping potion that would give her ease.

"Wait," Valentine said. "I'll be back in a moment. I'll ask Deliamber for something to calm you."

He darted from the room, down the hall, wondering which room was the sorcerer's. All doors were closed. He debated knocking at random, hoping not to blunder in on Zalzan Gibor, when a dry voice said out of the darkness from a point somewhere below his elbow, "Do you have trouble sleeping?"

"Deliamber?"

"Here. Close by you."

Valentine peered, narrowing his eyes, and made out the Vroon sitting cross-tentacles in the hallway in some kind of posture of meditation. Deliamber rose.

"I thought you might come in search of me soon," he said.

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"Carabella has had a sending. She needs a drug to quiet her spirit. Do you have anything useful?"

"No drugs, no. A touch, though — it can be done. Come." The little Vroon glided along the corridor and into the room that Valentine shared with Carabella. She had not moved, still huddled pitifully beside the bed with her robe wrapped carelessly about her. Deliamber went to her at once; his ropy tendrils delicately enfolded her shoulders, and she loosened her tautly held muscles and slumped as though rendered boneless. The sound of her heavy breathing was loud in the room. After a moment she looked up, calmer now, but still with a dazed, frozen look in her eyes.

She gestured toward Valentine and said, "I dreamed that he was — that he had been — " She hesitated.

"I know," said Deliamber.

"It is not true," Valentine said thickly. "I am only a juggler."

Mildly Deliamber said, "You are only a juggler *now*."

"You believe this nonsense too?"

"It was obvious from the first. When you stepped between the Skandar and me. This is the act of the king, I told myself, and I read your soul —"

"What?"

"A professional trick. I read your soul and saw what had been done to you —"

"But such a thing is impossible!" Valentine protested. "To take a man's mind from his body and put it in another's and put another's mind in his —"

"Impossible? No," Deliamber said. "I think not. There have been tales coming out of Suvreal that studies into this art are being done at the court of the King of Dreams. For several years now the rumors of strange experiments have trickled forth."

Valentine stared sullenly at his fingertips. "It could not be done."

"So I thought too, when first I heard it. But then I considered. There are many wizardries nearly as great whose secrets I myself know, and I am only a minor wizard. The seeds of such an art have long existed. Maybe some Suvraelu sorcerer has found a way to germinate those seeds at last. Valentine, if I were you I would not reject the possibility."

"A change of bodies?" Valentine said, bewildered. "This is not my true body? Whose would it be, then?"

"Who knows? Some unlucky man struck down by accident, drowned, perhaps, or choked on a piece of meat, or the victim of some evil toadstool unwisely eaten. Dead, anyway, in some manner that left his body reasonably whole; and taken within the hour of death to some secret place, and there to have the Coronal's soul transplanted into the empty shell; and then another man, giving up his own body forever, quickly taking possession of the Coronal's vacated skull, possibly retaining much of the Coronal's own memory and mind in union with his own, so

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that he can carry on the masquerade of ruling as though he were the true monarch —"

"I accept none of this as remotely real," said Valentine stubbornly.

"Nevertheless," Deliamber said, "when I looked into your soul I saw everything even as I describe it to you now. And felt more than a little fear — in my trade one doesn't often meet Coronals, or stumble on such evidences of gross treason — and I took a moment to compose myself and asked myself if I would not be wiser to forget what I had seen, and for a time I seriously considered it. But then I knew that I could not, that I would be whipped with monstrous dreams until the end of my days if I ignore what I knew. I told myself that there is much in the world that is in need of repair, and I would, Divine willing, be part of the fixing. And now the fixing has begun."

Valentine said, "There is nothing to it."

"For the sake of argument, say that there is," Deliamber urged. "Pretend that they came upon you in Til-omon and cast you from your body and put a usurper upon the throne. Suppose that that is the case. What would you do then?"

"Nothing at all."

"No?"

"Nothing," said Valentine forcefully. "Let him be Coronal who *wants* to be Coronal. I think power is a sickness and governing is a folly for madmen. If I once dwelled on Castle Mount, so be it, but I am not there now, and nothing in my being impels me to go back there. I'm a juggler and a good one getting better, and a happy man. Is the Coronal happy? Is the Pontifex? If I have been cast out of power, I regard it as good fortune. I would not now resume the burden."

"It is what you were destined to carry."

"Destined? Destined?" Valentine laughed. "Just as fair to say that I was destined to be Coronal a little while, and then to be displaced by someone more fitting. One must be crazy to be a ruler, Deliamber, and I'm sane. The government is a burden and a chore. I would not accept it."

"You will," Deliamber said. "You've been tampered with and you are not yourself. But once a Coronal, forever a Coronal. You will be healed and come into your own again, Lord Valentine."

"Don't use that title!"

"It will be yours again," said Deliamber.

Valentine angrily shook the suggestion away. He looked toward Carabella: she was asleep on the floor, head against the bed. Carefully he lifted her and put her under the coverlet. To Deliamber he said, "It grows late, and there's been much foolishness tonight. My head hurts from all this heavy talk. Do to me what you did to her, wizard, and grant me sleep, and say no more to me of responsibilities

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that have never been mine and are never going to be mine. We must perform tomorrow, and I want to be rested for it."

"Very well. Get into bed."

Valentine settled in beside Carabella. The Vroon touched him lightly, then with more force, and Valentine felt his mind growing cloudy. Sleep came upon him easily, like a thick white mist sweeping up out of the ocean at twilight. Good. Good. Willingly he relinquished consciousness.

And in the night he dreamed, and there was about the dream a bright fierce glow that had the unmistakable aspect of a sending, for it was a dream vivid beyond imagining.

He saw himself crossing the harsh and terrible purple plain that he had visited so often in recent slumber, but this time he knew without question where that plain was: no realm of fantasy, but rather these parched sands were the sand of the distant continent of Suvrael, that lay beneath the unshielded glare of the naked sun, and these fissures in the ground were scars of summer, where what little moisture the soil contained had been sucked forth. Ugly twisted plants with swollen grayish leaves lay limp against the ground, and things with thorns and weird angular joints grew tall, but all these were widely spaced in the barren earth. Valentine walked swiftly, not only because of the heat and the merciless biting wind and the skin-cracking dryness, but also because he was late, he was overdue at the palace of the King of Dreams, where he had been hired to perform.

The palace now loomed before him, sinister, black-shadowed, all spidery turrets and jagged porticoes, a building as spiky and forbidding as the plants of the desert. More a jail than a palace it seemed, at least in its outer aspect, but inside everything was different, cool and luxurious, with fountains in the courtyards, and soft plush draperies, and a scent of flowers in the air. Servants bowed and beckoned to him, leading him to inner chambers, stripping away his sand-crusted clothes, bathing him, drying him in feathery towels, giving him fresh clothes, elegant jeweled robes, offering him chilled sherbets, icy wine of a silvery hue, morsels of unknown delicate meats, and at last bringing him to the great high-vaulted throne room where the King of Dreams sat in state.

At a vast distance Valentine saw him enthroned: Simonan Barjazid, the malign and unpredictable Power who from this wind-swept desert territory sent his messages of mysterious import all through Majipoor. He was a heavy-bodied man, his face beardless, fleshy-jowled, eyes deep set and ringed with dark circles, and around his close-cropped stubbly head he wore the golden diadem of his power, the thought-amplifying apparatus that a Barjazid had devised a thousand years ago. To Simonan's left sat his son

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Cristoph, fleshy like his father, and at his right hand was his son Minax, the heir, a man of lean and forbidding aspect, dark-skinned and sharp-faced, as if honed by the desert winds.

The King of Dreams, with a casual wave of his hand, ordered Valentine to begin.

It was knives he juggled, ten, fifteen of them, thin shining stilettos that would pierce right through his arm if they dropped wrongly, but he handled them with ease, juggling as only Sleet might do, or perhaps Zalzan Gibor, a virtuoso display of skill. Valentine stood still, making only the tiniest flicking motions of his hands and wrists; and the knives soared aloft and flashed with keen brilliance, coursing high through the air and falling perfectly back to his waiting fingers; and as they rose and fell, rose and fell, the arc that they described took on an alteration of form, no longer a mere cascade but becoming the starburst emblem of the Coronal, blades pointing outward as they flew through the air; and abruptly, as Valentine approached the climax of his performance, the knives froze in midair, and hovered there just above his questing fingers and would not descend to them.

And from behind the throne came a scowling fierce-eyed man who was Dominin Barjazid, the third of the sons of the King of Dreams, and he strode toward Valentine and with an easy contemptuous gesture swept the starburst of knives from the air, thrusting them in the sash of his robe.

The King of Dreams smiled mockingly. "You are an excellent juggler, Lord Valentine. At last you find a proper occupation."

"I am Coronal of Majipoor," Valentine replied.

"Were. Were. Were. You are a wanderer now, and fit to be nothing more."

"Lazy," said Minax Barjazid.

"Cowardly," said Cristoph Barjazid. "Idle."

"A shirker of duty," Dominin Barjazid declared.

"Your rank is forfeit," said the King of Dreams. "Your office is vacated. Go. Go and juggle, Valentine the juggler. Go, idler. Go, wanderer."

"I am Coronal of Majipoor," Valentine repeated firmly.

"No longer," said the King of Dreams. He touched his hands to the diadem at his forehead, and Valentine rocked and shook as if the ground had opened at his feet, and he stumbled and fell, and when he looked up again he saw that Dominin Barjazid now was clad in the green doublet and ermine robe of a Coronal and had altered in appearance so that his face was the face of Lord Valentine and his body was the body of Lord Valentine, and out of the juggling knives that he had taken from Valentine he had fashioned the starburst crown of a Coronal, which his father Simonan Barjazid now placed upon his brow.

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"See?" the King of Dreams cried. "Power passes to the worthy! Go, juggler! Go!"

And Valentine fled into the purple desert and saw the angry swirls of a sandstorm racing toward him out of the south and tried to escape, but the storm came at him from all directions. He roared, "I am Lord Valentine the Coronal!" but his voice was lost in the wind and he felt sand in his teeth. He shouted, "This is treason, to usurp the power!" and his shout was blown away. He looked toward the palace of the King of Dreams, but it was no longer to be seen, and a great and shattering sense of eternal loss overwhelmed him.

He woke.

Carabella lay peacefully beside him. The first pale light of dawn was entering the room. Although it had been a terrible dream, a monstrous dream, a sending of the most portentous sort, he felt utterly calm. For days now he had tried to deny the truth, but there was no rejecting it now, however bizarre, however fantastic, it seemed. In another body he had once been Coronal of Majipoor, and body and identity had been stolen somehow from him. Could it be? He sorted through the deepest places of his mind, trying to uncover memories of power, ceremonies on the Mount, glimpses of royal pomp, the taste of responsibility. Nothing. Nothing whatever. He was a juggler, and nothing more than a juggler, and he could remember no shred

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of his life before Pidruid: it was as if he had been born on that hillside, moments before Shanamir the herdsman had encountered him, born there with money in his purse and a flask of good red wine at his hip and a scattering of false memories in his mind.

And if it were true? If he were Coronal?

Why, then, he must go forth, for the sake of the commonwealth of Majipoor, to overthrow the tyrant and reclaim his rightful position. There would be that obligation upon him. But the notion was absurd. It created a dryness in his throat and a pounding in his chest, close to panic. To overthrow that dark-haired man of power, who had ridden in pomp through Pidruid? How could that possibly be done? How even come near a Coronal, let alone push him from his perch? That it had been done once — maybe — was no argument that it could be done again, and by a wandering juggler, an easy-natured young man who felt no compelling urge to tackle the impossible. Besides, Valentine saw in himself so little aptitude for governing. If he had in fact been Coronal, he must have had years of training on Castle Mount, a lengthy apprenticeship in the ways and uses of power; but not a trace of that was left to him now. How could he pretend to be a monarch, with none of a monarch's skills in his head?

And yet — and yet —

He glanced down at Carabella. She was awake; her eyes were open; she was watching him in silence. The awe was still upon her, but no longer the terror.

She said, "What will you do, lord?"

"Call me Valentine, now and ever."

"If you so command me."

"I do so command you," he said.

"And tell me — Valentine: what will you do?"

"Travel with the Skandars," he replied. "Continue to juggle. Master the art more thoroughly. Keep close watch on my dreams. Bide my time, seek to comprehend. What else can I do, Carabella?" He put his hand lightly to hers, and momentarily she shrank from his touch, and then did not, but pressed her other hand above his. He smiled. "What else can I do, Carabella?"

(to be continued next month)

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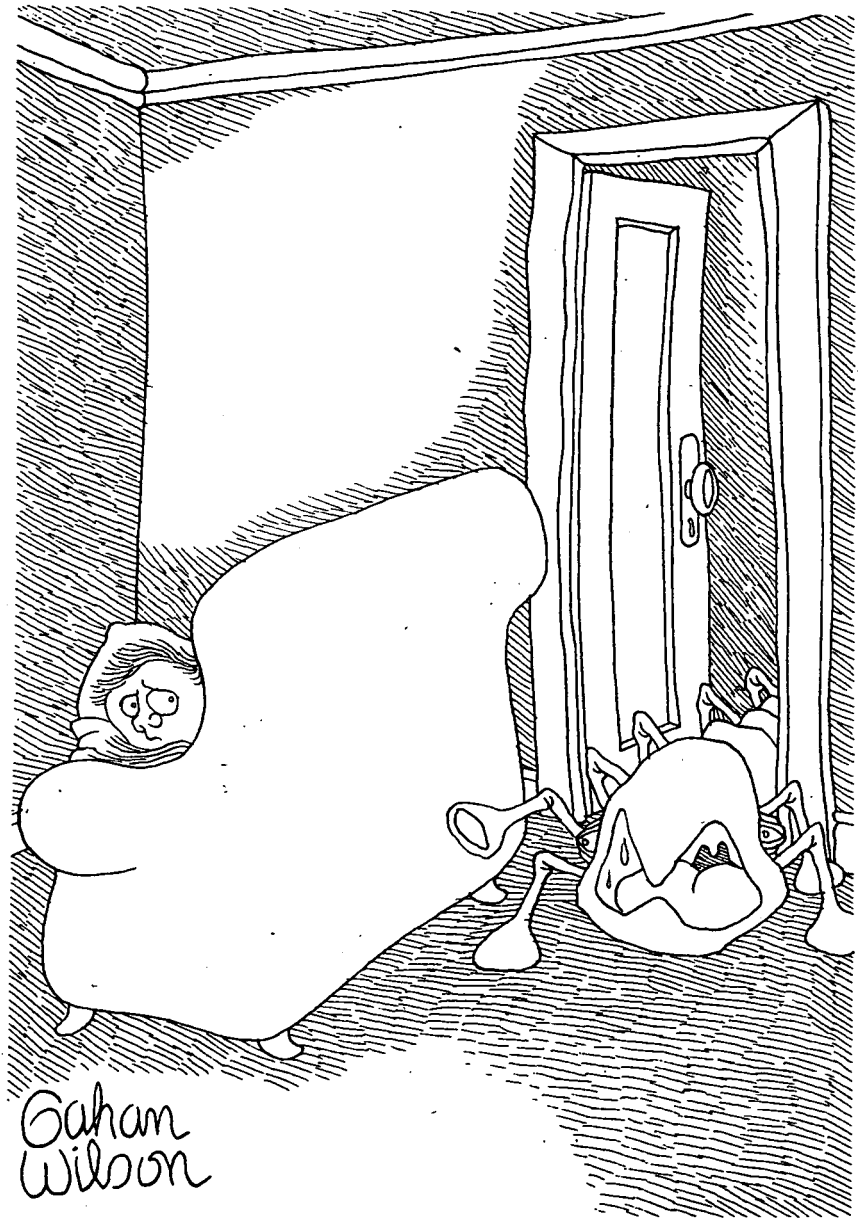

"Don't worry — it's just my kid brother."

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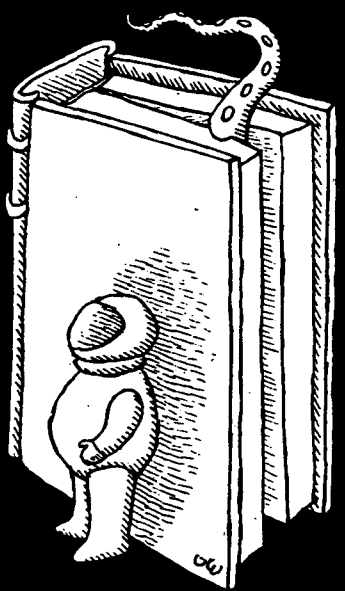
Books

JOANNA RUSS



In the February 1979 issue, Joanna Russ wrote a column raking over the "barren ground" of current fantasy (and, especially, heroic fantasy). Her comments generated dozens of letters of vehement disagreement (some were published in the July issue), and the column below was written in response to those letters.

—ELF

Critics seem to find it necessary, at least once in a career, to write a statement defending criticsm *per se*. Shaw, Pauline Kael, Eric Bentley, and James Blish have all done it. That I'm doing it too doesn't prove I'm in the same league, but it does indicate the persistence of the issues involved and that they occur outside, as well as inside, science fiction.

I have tried to speak to general issues rather than "defend" my own criticism. Issues are, in any case, more important than personalities, although there is a (small) section of fandom which sees in aesthetic or political disagreement nothing but personal squabbling motivated by envy. It's not for me to judge how good my criticism is; if enough readers think it's bad, and the editor thinks so too, presumably he'll stop printing it, although writing book reviews (except for places like *The New York Times)* is underpaid, overworked, and a labor of love. The problem is usually to recruit reviewers, not discourage them.

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Here are some of the complaints that keep coming up:

1. *Don't shove your politics into your reviews. Just review the books.*

I will — when the authors keep politics out of their stories. But they never do; in fact, it seems absolutely impossible to write anything without immediately making all sorts of assumptions about what human nature is, what good and bad behavior consists of, what men ought to be, what women ought to be, which states of mind and character are valuable, which are the opposite, and so on. Once fiction gets beyond the level of minimal technical competence, a reviewer must address these judgments of value. Generally readers don't notice the presence of familiar value judgments in stories, but do notice (and object to) unfamiliar ones as "political." Hence arises the insistence (in itself a very vehement, political judgment) that art and politics have nothing to do with one another, that artists ought be "above" politics, and that a critic making political comments about fiction is importing something foreign into an essentially neutral area. But if "politics" means the relations of power that obtain between groups of people, and the way these are concretely embodied in personal relations, social institutions, and received ideas, (among which is the idea that art ought not to be political) then such neutrality simply doesn't exist. Fiction which isn't openly polemical or didactic is nonetheless chock-full of politics. If beauty in fiction bears any relation to truth (as Matthew Arnold thought) then the human (including social and political) truth of a piece of fiction matters, for aesthetic reasons. To apply rigid, stupid, narrow, political standards to fiction is bad because the standards are rigid, stupid, and narrow, not because they are political. For an example of (to my mind) profound, searching, brilliant, political criticism, see Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Ganet*.

2. *You don't prove what you say; you just assert it.*

This statement is, I think, based on a cognitive error inculcated (probably) by American high school education. The error is that all proofs must be of the "hard" kind, i.e., cut-and-dried and susceptible of presentation in syllogistic form. An acquaintance with the modern philosophy of science would disabuse people of this notion; even a surprising amount of scientific proof is not of this kind. As philosophers since Plato have been pointing out, aesthetic and moral matters are usually not susceptible of such "hard" proof.

3. *Then your opinion is purely subjective.*

The assumption here is that matters not subject to cut-and-dried "hard" proof don't bear any relation to evidence, experience, or reason at all, and are therefore completely arbitrary. There is considerable indirect evidence one can bring against this view. For one thing, the people who advance it

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don't stick to it in their own lives; they make decisions based on indirect evidence all the time and strongly resist any imputation that such decisions are arbitrary. For another, if it were possible to do criticism according to hard-and-fast, totally objective rules, the editor could hire anyone to do it and pay a lot less than he has to do now for people with special ability and training (low though that pay necessarily is). It's true that the apparatus by which critics judge books is subjective in the sense of being inside the critic and not outside, unique, and based on the intangibles of training, talent, and experience. But that doesn't *per se* make it arbitrary. What can make it seem arbitrary is that the whole preliminary process of judgment, if you trace it through all its stages, is co-extensive with the critic's entire education. So critics tend to suppress it in reviews (with time and training most of it becomes automatic, anyway). Besides, much critical thinking consists of *gestalt* thinking, or the recognition of patterns, which does occur instantaneously in the critic's head, although without memory, experience, and the constant checking of novel objects against templates-in-the-head (which are constantly being revised in the light of new experience) it could not occur at all.* Hence angry readers can make the objections above, or add:

4. *Everyone's entitled to his own opinion.*

Have you noticed how often people say "I feel" instead of "I think" or (God forbid) "I know"? Kids who discover "It's a free country!" at seven graduate to "Everyone's entitled to his own opinion," by fourteen. The process of intimidation by which young people are made to feel humanly worthless if they don't appreciate "great literature" (literature the teacher often doesn't understand or can't explain)** is one of the ghastly facts of American education. Some defenses against this experience take the form of asserting there's no such thing as great art, some that whatever moves one intensely *is* great art. Both are ways of asserting the primacy and authenticity of one's own experience, and that's fine. But whatever you (or I) like intensely isn't, just because of that, great anything, and the literary canon, although incom-

I used to inform people of the endings of television plays (before the endings happened) until my acquaintances gently but firmly informed me they would rather the endings came as a surprise. When asked how I knew what was coming by friends who enjoyed such an odd talent (and some do) I could explain only part of the time. The cues people respond to in fiction or drama are complex and people are not always fully conscious of them.

**Or oddities that entered the curriculum decades before and refuse to be dislodged, like "To a Waterfowl." For some reason students often end up with the most sophisticated, flawed, or least accessible works of great writers: twelve-year-olds reading Romeo and Juliet, for example, or Silas Marner.

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plete and biased, is not merely an insiders' snobbish conspiracy to make outsiders feel rotten. (Although it is certainly used that way far too often.)

The problem with literature and literary criticism is that there is no obvious craft involved — so people who wouldn't dream of challenging a dance critic's comments on an *assoluta's* line or a *prima donna's* musicianship are conscious of no reason not to dismiss mine on J. R. R. Tolkien. We're all dealing with language, after all, aren't we? But there is a very substantial craft involved here, although its material isn't toes or larynxes. And some opinions are worth a good deal more than others.

5. *I knew it. You're a snob.*

Science fiction is a small country which for years has maintained a protective standards-tariff to encourage native manufactures. Many readers are, in fact, unacquainted with the general canon of English literature or the standards of criticism outside our own small field. Add to this the defensiveness so many people feel about high culture and you get the wholesale inflation of reputations James Blish lambasts in *The Issue At Hand.* Like him, I believe that somebody has to stop handing out stars and kisses: if "great writer" means Charles Dickens or Virginia Woolf (not to mention William Shakespeare) then it does not mean C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien, about whom the most generous consensus of mainstream critical opinion is that they are good, interesting, minor authors. And so on.

6. *You're vitriolic, too.*

It's true. Critics tend to be an irritable lot. Here are some examples:

"That light-hearted body, the Bach Choir, has had what I may befittingly call another shy at the Mass in B minor." (George Bernard Shaw, *Music In London*, v.ii, Constable & Co., Ltd., London, 1956, p. 55)

"'This eloquent novel', says the jacket of Taylor Caldwell's *The Devil's Advocate*, making two errors in three words...." (Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, Advent, Chicago, 1967, pg. 29)

"...Mr. Zirul has committed so many other failures of technique that a whole course in fiction writing could be erected above his hapless corpse." (William Atheling, Jr. [James Blish], *The Issue At Hand*, Advent, Chicago, 1964, p. 83)

Why do we do it?

First, there is the reactive pain. Only those who have reviewed, year in and year out, know how truly abominable most fiction is. And we can't remove ourselves from the pain. Ordinary readers can skip, or read every third word, or quit in the middle. We can't. We must read carefully, with our sensitivities at full operation and our critical-historical apparatus always in high gear — or we may miss that subtle satire which disguises itself as cliché, that first novel whose beginning, alas, was never revised, that gem of a quiet

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story obscured in a loud, flashy collection, that experiment in form which could be mistaken for sloppiness, that appealing tale partly marred by (but also made possible by) naiveté, that complicated situation that only pays off near the end of the book. Such works exist, but in order not to miss them one must continually extend one's sensitivity, knowledge, and critical care to works that only abuse such faculties. The mental sensation is that of eating garbage, I assure you, and if critics' accumulated suffering did not find an outlet in the vigor of our language, I don't know what we would do. And it's the critics who care the most who suffer the most; irritation is a sign of betrayed love. As Shaw puts it:

> "...criticism written without personal feeling is not worth reading. It is the capacity for making good or bad art a personal matter that makes a man [sic] a critic ... when people do less than their best, and do that less at once badly and self-complacently, I hate them, loathe them, detest them, long to tear them limb from limb and strew them in gobbets about the stage or platform.... In the same way really fine artists inspire me with the warmest possible regard.... When my critical mood is at its height, personal feeling is not the word; it is passion...." (*Music in London*, v.i, Constable & Co., London, 1956, pp. 51-52)

But there are other reasons. Critical judgments are so complex (and take place in such a complicated context), the vocabulary of praise and blame available in English is so vague, so fluid, and so constantly shifting, and the physical space allowed is so small, that critics welcome any way of expressing judgments that will be both *precise* and *compact*. If *vivid* be added thereunto, fine — what else is good style? Hence critics, whenever possible, express their judgments in figurative language. Wit is a form of condensation (see Freud if you think this is my arbitrary fiat) just as parody is a form of criticism (see Dwight McDonald's Modern Library collection thereof).

Dramatization is another. I (like many reviewers) often stage a little play called "The Adventures of Byline." Byline (or "I") is the same species of creature as The Kindly Editor or The Good Doctor, who appear from time to time in these pages. That is, she is a form of shorthand. When Byline rewrites story X that doesn't mean that I — the real, historical personage — actually did or will or wish to rewrite story X, or that I expect its real, historical author to rewrite it to Byline's prescription, any more than my saying that "my" copy of *Bug Jack Barron* tried to punch "me" in the nose means that such an event really happened. Pauline Kael's Movie Loon is another such fiction; these little creatures we send scurrying about the page are not our real, live selves, and their exploits are dictated more by the exi-

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gencies of our form than by a desire for personal glory.

7. Never mind all that stuff. Just tell me what I'd enjoy reading.

Bless you, what makes you think I know? (See, there goes Byline.) Actually critics can make educated guesses from time to time about the tastes of some groups of readers. Editors must, such judgments being their bread and butter — and look how often *they* fail. If judgments of beauty and truth are difficult, imagine what happens when the issue is escape reading, i.e. something as idiosyncratic as guided daydreams. Perhaps the popularity of series novels is due in part to readers' desire for a reliable, easily-reproducible pleasure. But the simplest good-bad scales (like *The Daily News* system of stars) is always colliding with readers' tastes. Some writers and publishers, in order to be sure of appealing to at least a stable fraction of the market, standardize their product. This can be done, but it tends to eliminate from fiction these idiosyncratic qualities other readers find valuable, art being of an order of complexity nearer to that of human beings (high) than that of facial tissues (low).

Now back to the topic of heroic fantasy, which occasioned the foregoing.

I know it's painful to be told that something in which one has invested intense emotion is not only bad art but bad for you, not only bad for you but ridiculous. I didn't do it to be mean, honest. Nor did I do it because the promise held out by heroic fantasy — the promise of escape into a wonderful Other world — is one I find temperamentally unappealing. On the contrary. It's because I understand the intensity of the demand so well (having spent my twenties reading Eddison and Tolkien; I even adapted *The Hobbit* for the stage) that I also understand the absolute impossibility of ever fulfilling that demand. The current popularity of heroic fantasy scares me; I believe it to be a symptom of political and cultural reaction due to economic depression. So does Robin Scott Wilson (who electrified a Modern Language Association seminar by calling *Dune* a fascist book), and Michael Moorcock (see his jacket copy for Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*, a novel which vehemently denounces the genre in the same terms Wilson does*), and the writers of *Bored of the Rings*, the Lampoon parody, from which came "Arrowroot, son of Arrowshirt."

Briefly, to answer other statements in the letters: I apologize for implying that Tolkien's hobbits and Ents (or his other bucolic-comic creations) are as empty-sublime as the Big People's heroics. But I agree (see question 5) that Tolkien is a good, interesting, minor writer whose strong point is his *pay-*

**Though* Dune *is, strictly speaking, science fiction. Wilson was talking about the-great-leader syndrome, and the heroic atmosphere* Dune *shares with heroic fantasy.*

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sages moralisés. Ditto C. S. Lewis, in his Narnia books. As for other writers mentioned, only strong, selective blindness could miss the Vancian cynicism or the massive Dunsanian irony (sometimes spilling over into despair) which make their heroism far from simple or unquestioned-by-the-authors-themselves. As for the others, I find them gharstly when uncorrected by comedy, or satire (Morris, sometimes), or (in Beagle's case) the nostalgic wistfulness which belongs to fantasy *per se* rather than the publisher's category (that, historically, is what it is) of heroic fantasy. I don't need to badmouth Poul Anderson, James Blish having already adequately done so, calling him (in his heroic phase) "the Thane of Minneapolis.... Anderson can write well, but this is seldom evident while he is in his Scand avatar, when he seems invariably to be writing in his sleep." (*The Issue At Hand*, p. 72) That our literary heritage began with feudal epics and *märchen* is no reason to keep on writing them forever. And daydreams about being tall, handsome (or beautiful), noble, admired, and involved in thrilling deeds are not the same as the as-if speculation which produces medical and technological advances.

It isn't the realists who find life dreadful. It's the romancers. After all, which group is trying to escape from life? Reality is horrible *and* wonderful, disappointing *and* ecstatic, beautiful *and* ugly. Reality is everything. Reality is what there is. Only the hopelessly insensitive find reality so pleasant as to never want to get away from it. But painkillers can be bad for the health, and even if they were not, I am damned if anyone will make me say that the newest fad in analgesics is equivalent to the illumination which is the other thing (besides pleasure) art ought to provide. Bravery, nobility, sublimity, and beauty that have no connection with the real world are simply fake, and once readers realize that escape *does not work*, the glamor fades, the sublime aristocrats turn silly, the profundities become simplifications, and one enters (if one is lucky) into the dreadful discipline of reality and art, like "The Penal Colony." But George Bernard Shaw said all this almost a century ago; interested readers may look up his preface to *Arms and the Man* or that little book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.

It's disheartening to see how little has changed. On the other hand, there is no pleasure like finding out the realities of human life, in which joy and misery, effort and release, dread and happiness, walk hand-in-hand.

We had better enjoy it. It's what there is.

—JOANNA RUSS

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In which Hollywood finally gets it right ... with a lot of help from outer space.

Special Effects

BY
MEL GILDEN

The famous movie director pulled ıto the driveway of his funky old ouse off Topanga Canyon. On the :at beside him was a big cardboard ox. It was so heavy that when he car-ed it into the house it made him walk ke a question mark. He set the box own carefully on the big table in the ıiddle of the dining room.

His wife, a beautiful dark-haired 'oman, watched him from the door-'ay that led to the kitchen.

"Is that it?" she said.

"That's it."

"Did you have any trouble?"

"Why should I have trouble? I rote the thing, directed it, scraped to-:ther most of the money. Who's gon-ı argue with me when I say I want to ke a prop home?"

She nodded.

He left the box and kissed her armly. She kissed back. He said, Dinner?"

"First?"

"They've waited this long. They ın wait till I eat. I'm starved."

The director and his wife ate. They lked about the movie the famous dictor had just finished. It was a sci-ıce fiction epic. It had cost eleven mil-ɔn dollars and four years of their 'es.

"What if nobody likes it?" the dictor said.

She shook her head. "You worry too much," she said.

The director didn't say anything. He watched the box while he sliced his steak and fussed with his mashed potatoes.

After dinner his wife helped him carry the box out to the garage. They went inside, turned on the light, and closed the door. The director's wife turned the latch, locking it. The direc-

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tor put the box down on the oil-stained floor beneath the window he had installed in the ceiling.

The director and his wife got down on their knees and carefully opened the cardboard box. They took knives and cut down the corners and folded the sides flat against the floor. They stood up, leaned against the counter near the door, and while they waited, studied the thing on the cardboard.

"It's a beautiful ship," the wife said.

The director grunted.

The ship was almost three feet across and had been likened to a cosmic chandelier. Towers, brilliantly lit in the movie, now dead, stuck up seemingly at random, and at odd heights, from a circular base. Even resting on the cement floor it seemed to float. It was a silly-looking thing, but it was what they wanted. They had carefully drawn plans on paper supplied by him, with the smallest pens he could find. He heard a scurrying noise.

"Here they come," his wife said.

Creatures crept out from behind stuff piled along the floorboards. They looked like little people made by children from toothpicks and balls of clay. Serious faces, made charming by their small size, stared first at the humans leaning against the counter, then at the preposterous thing in the middle of the floor.

They walked around it, reminding the director of a family inspecting the new car. Sounds like those that might come from the smallest music box imaginable came from the throats of th little people.

"You're the soprano," the direct said. "You're the one they can hea Ask them."

"Is the ship all right?" the directo wife said to the little people.

The small creatures on the flo stopped and looked at her. She sa again, "Is it all right?"

The creatures sang a tune of ha mony and thanks — one of the few bi of alien language the director and h wife had learned to recognize in th nearly five years since the time they gone out to investigate a strange lou noise in their back yard and had fir discovered the little people in th wreckage of their ship.

"I hope the public likes my mov as much as these folks like that ship

The creatures ignored the two hu mans then. Soon the director and h wife got tired of watching them run u and back with equipment they'd bu from bits and pieces the humans ha supplied. The director climbed a ladd and opened the window in the cent of the garage roof. Below him, he sa the ship and the creatures working o it. When he came down, he and h wife went back to the house. Over co fee the director said, "I've still got edit the damn thing."

"Tomorrow," his wife said.

The director couldn't sleep, thin ing about his movie. He'd long sin gotten used to having little people his garage.

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A purring noise began, grew loud- and his wife turned over in her ep. The director followed the noise o the bathroom, and through the ndow he saw bright light, so solid it med to have weight and form, shoot t of the roof top window in the gar- e. The ship rose above the garage — airy carrousel — higher and higher til it was lost in the gray blanket that s the nighttime sky in Los Angeles.

He stood at the window for a long ıe after even the purring was gone.

The next morning his wife was en- ıus of him for having seen the ship ve, and tried hard to understand ıt by the time her husband could tear nself away from the window, the p was gone.

While running film through his ıvieola, the director shook his head d said out loud, "I still say it's a nn funny-looking ship. Nobody'll ieve it." He stared glumly at the ma- ne's screen.

He was glum in the weeks before press preview, and glum while get- g into his tuxedo. He was so nervous t his wife — in her luminous white ecian gown — drove them to the ater.

Inside, stylish men and women re finding their seats. Conversations ispered around the director and his e. Friends and people who had rked with him on the movie hailed ı from across the big room.

The lights went down. While the vie ran, the director watched the

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audience by the light reflected from the screen. He could not tell if their expressions were rapt or bored. As he had hoped, nobody laughed at the end.

When the movie was over, the director listened to what people were saying while they collected their coats. The comment he heard most often was, "How does he expect anybody to believe that mother ship?" He looked at his wife. She gripped his hand.

A few people congratulated him. He nodded and smiled and shook hands. "See you later at the party," some of them said.

He and his wife walked through the thinning crowd and stood in the cold outside the theater. The stylish men and women were waiting for their cars to be brought around front.

There was a rumble of thunder, though the sky was clear. The crowd noise stopped for a few seconds and time hung suspended. In that space, the director heard a purring sound that grew louder moment by moment. People looked around for the source of the sound. The director whispered into his wife's ear and they looked skyward together. The crowd became excited, and all pointing fingers pointed at the same thing. It was the little ship the director had brought home, or one like it. swooped down and hovered outsi the theater making a noise like a co tented cat. The director chortled a had difficulty keeping still. His impul was to do a crazy dance with his wif but he knew dignity was called for. B sides, she was as busy staring as ever body else. Then the ship sang the tu of harmony and thanks — the sar tune the director had used for the ma musical theme of the movie. As on the crowd groaned in amazement.

After the ship had run through t tune twice, it rose into the air, made right-angle turn, and flew west fast than the eye could follow.

Minutes went by during which pe ple developed stiff necks looking at t sky. Traffic had stopped. The resultir jam would take hours to untangle.

The movie critic for the biggest da ly paper in town shook hands with t director and said, "You had a hit your hands before, but now...." shrugged. "You may be the first pr phet of a new religion. How did y manage it?"

The director said, "It's not wh you know. It's who you know." and his wife collapsed with laughter

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A short and surprising sf tale from a new writer who tells us that he was born in 1947 in New York City, where he still resides with his wife and daughter. When not writing or pursuing one of his pastimes — guitar-picking, backpacking, stamp collecting — he teaches at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn.

Exodus

BY

STEPHEN L. SUFFET

"But will it work, Perkins?" Jamal Hassad demanded of me. "That's the bottom line. Those generals aren't about to piddle away good piastres on a weapons system that doesn't deliver what it promises."

The boss was insistent, but as Transarmco's head of R. and D., he wasn't about to lay the company's reputation — or his own precious tookas — on the line for another class-A fiasco. Every smarty-pants schoolboy knows the story of the South African War when we developed an ethno-selective bio-toxin that was supposed to zap only the Afrikaaners. Instead it turned up wasting half the black population as well, and in the end two of our directors were hauled before some international tribunal and hanged as war criminals. It took nearly fifteen years for Transarmco to recover from *that* blunder.

"Oh, you can bet your sweet life it'll work, chief," I assured Hassad, "and when it does, we'll have every military procurement agent from Stockholm to Sao Paulo banging down our door with orders."

Although he quickly acknowledged my assurance with a slight grin, I doubted that Hassad honestly believed that I had cracked the problem of what we in the armaments community call IPAT: individually programmed anti-personnel targeting. Such a system was until this year thought to be several decades away. However, with recent breakthroughs in microelectronic feedback engineering making it apparent that our competitors could market an analagous system within months, even weeks, the boss had no choice but to accept my word at face value.

Nevertheless, Jamal Hassad was an exceedingly cautious man, and it was

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just this caution which no doubt enabled him to survive so long in a business where one mistake could literally cost him his neck. Thus, with a gentle shake of the head he informed me, "You know, of course, Perkins, we can't expect to sell a system like IPAT on computer simulations alone. Before we start taking any of those orders you're so sure of, we're going to have to run a field test first."

"A field test?" I asked with only the barest trace of surprise.

"A field test," he repeated.

That was terrible news indeed. For a political entity like a nation state, an international alliance, or even a guerrilla movement, a field test is no big deal, especially if it's conducted during an already-existing military conflict. But for a multinational corporation like Transarmco, which lacks both the desire and the legal right to engage in warfare, a field test is an altogether sticky matter. Invariably it means trashing some innocent third party, usually back across the time barrier so there is absolutely no chance of retaliation.

Even then it isn't all easy street. You have to publicize the test well enough that all your potential customers know that it's the real McCoy and not just some razzle-dazzle, hokus-pokus hoax. At the same time you got to keep a tight enough lid on the whole affair so that some snoopy-nosed investigator from the United Nations doesn't blow the whistle — unless you don't mind dangling from the short end of a long rope. As you can well imagine, Transarmco cannot simply run an announcement of the IPAT system field test in the classified ad section of *Modern Weaponry* magazine.

"So when do you want it?" I asked Hassad.

"Thursday. That's when our guests arrive from the Soviet Union and the United States."

"The Soviet Union and the United States?" I wondered out loud. "What's wrong with the big-time powers like Brazil, Sweden, and Iran? Why waste the IPAT on a third-rate has-been like Russia or the U.S.?"

Hassad replied with a nasty scowl. My last remark about third-rate has-beens must have proven especially offensive to him as an Egyptian. After all, it's not every country that fights and loses the same war eighteen times in three hundred years. Surely retreating from the Suez Canal on a dozen different occasions was embarrassing enough, but watching the blue and white Star of David fly atop the Great Pyramids at Giza destroyed forever any pretenisions Hassad's country had of greatness. Which, incidentally, brings me to confess a little cover-up of my own: My name isn't Perkins. It's Perlman — Yitzak Perlman, son of the Israeli general who commanded the siege of Cairo.

"You still haven't answered my question, chief," I reminded Hassad. "Why don't we go right for the big

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bucks instead of puttering around with the Russians and Americans? Anyway, those countries are loaded with too many bleeding-heart do-gooders ready to turn us over to some war-crimes tribunal at the first hint of a field test."

"Orders from above," he snapped. "The company has its reasons, Perkins. Just make sure everything's ready to roll Thursday when the customers show up."

"Usual procedure?" I asked. "Good Guys versus Bad Guys?"

"Usual procedure," he responded. "And be damned sure the Good Guys win. We're not dealing with Brazilians this time. The Russians and Americans like to see happy endings."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jamal Hassad declared as he led his small entourage of prospective purchasers into the secret S-4 annex of Transarmco's telechronological laboratory, "it is my pleasure to introduce to you the genius behind our company's IPAT system, the distinguished Dr. Ike Perkins."

I thanked my boss for his kind words, then immediately commenced my presentation. "As you no doubt know," I began as I sat down at the console, "you are about to watch an actual combat deployment of Transarmco's individually programmed antipersonnel targeting system. Until now it has generally been believed that such weaponry could not possibly be on line for at least thirty or forty years, but because of recent advances by our scientists and engineers here at Transarmco, we can...."

"Perkins," Hassad interrupted, "you can dispense with the sales pitch. Our clients have been fully briefed, so please procede at once to the test."

"Oh, yes, the test. Very well," I said, "for today's demonstration I have selected an altercation between an ancient, semi-nomadic, aboriginal tribe from the eastern Mediterranean and a powerful empire which has held them in slavery for several generations...."

"That's what I like, Perkins," Hassad again interrupted, "Good Guys versus Bad Guys. And we are intervening on the side of the Good Guys, of course."

"Of course," I echoed.

"Then continue with the show, Perkins," he said as he nodded to his apparently contented audience.

"I have recently established contact with the leader of the enslaved tribe," I explained, "and he's more than willing to cooperate with us. In fact, on his own initiative he has already instigated a series of work stoppages and other acts of sabotage which have created havoc throughout the empire. In one instance he managed to get his people to simultaneously release thousands of frogs in the homes of their masters, and in another instance he had his followers spill so much honey that it attracted great swarms of flies. Several times the emperor who has been holding them in captivity was about to free

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the tribe, but he has always reconsidered at the last moment."

Just then one of the Americans spoke up. "Dr. Perkins," he asked me, "what exactly do you mean by 'established contact?' Are you implying that these ancient nomads are cognizant of your identity?"

"Not at all," I answered. "You must realize that they are an extremely primitive people. I don't even appear to them in anthropomorphic form. I maintain contact only with their leader, an elder statesman well into his eighties, and to him I look like a patch of fire. Nothing else."

"And this old man responds to a patch of fire?" a Russian wanted to know.

"He does," I replied. "To tell the truth, he believes I'm some sort of god, and I've done nothing to dispel that notion."

Hassad and the group of customers chuckled at that last assertion, although I didn't find it so amusing. With the IPAT system and the telechronological console at my disposal, there actually wasn't that much difference between me and a god — at least not to the old man whom I contacted.

When the audience had recovered from their brief spurt of laughter I went on. "My conversations with this tribal leader indicate that one more hard blow will bring the evil emperor to his knees and allow the Good Guys to get what they want."

"And what is that?" another Russian inquired. "The destruction of their masters' empire?"

"Not at all," I said once more. "What they want is their own emancipation from bondage, not conquest, vengeance, or anything else. And that's precisely why our company's individually programmed antipersonnel targeting is so appropriate for the situation. The destruction of the masters' empire can be achieved by any sophisticated modern weapons system. But what IPAT offers is more than just simple sophistication. IPAT offers absolutely perfect control over the degree and quality of the kill. If it is your desire to wipe out any one portion of a population — say blue-eyed, left-handed females born of twenty-nine-year-old mothers — and leave everyone else entirely unscathed, then IPAT is your baby."

"Does that mean, Dr. Perkins," the first Russian said, "that your IPAT can put an end to the Trotskyites once and for all?"

That time everyone laughed, including me.

"No," I told the questioner, "I'm afraid that it cannot yet be programmed to destroy people on the basis of their beliefs alone. But," I added, "if your Trotskyites are — how do you say it? — card-carrying members of some counter-revolutionary organization, then, yes, it can zap them."

Both the Americans and the Russians seemed to enjoy that claim. Hassad, however, appeared to grow impa-

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tient with the delay and goaded me on. "Come on, Perkins," he grunted, "we don't have all day."

"As you say, chief," I told him, and within a wink I had hit a series of buttons on the console. Two-tenths of a second later a white-haired, wrinkled old man clad in ancient garments appeared on the video screen. My audience hovered around me as I engaged the linguistic translator program and began to speak:

"Yet will I bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterwards he will let you go hence, and when he shall let you go he shall surely thrust you out altogether. For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment. But unto you Moses, and unto the Children of Israel, who by my commandment shall mark their households with the blood of a first-year lamb upon their doorposts, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt."

No sooner had I spoken those words than one of the Americans screamed, "Stop the demonstration! We have seen enough!" Moments later several burly guards rushed into the S-4 annex and snapped handcuffs on both Jamal Hassad and me. The two of us had been very neatly set up as patsies by our own supervisors at Transarmco. The heat had been getting too great lately, and they must have figured that it would cool things down if they allowed a couple of their boys to go to the drop for war crimes.

But it was too late. The Soviet-American team tried frantically to shut down the telechronological console, but I had rigged it so it would be absolutely tamperproof. And once deployed, the IPAT system could not be stopped. That night, every first-born Egyptian of the Pharaoh's empire was struck dead by Transarmco's weaponry. The rest of story is history — and also religion.

Jamal Hassad mumbled and cursed and snarled as they led the two of us away. Only I smiled. But who could blame him? After all, Israel had just defeated Egypt for the nineteenth time — or should I say the *first* time?

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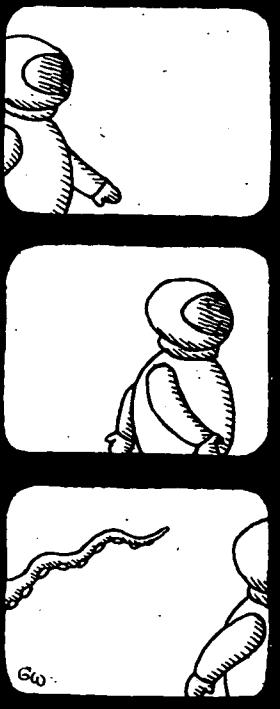
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



CREATURES WALK AMONG US

This time around I'm going to turn the column over to the Old Movie Buff. The OMB lives in movie theatres (mostly revival houses), never looks at television, doesn't own a TV set, and hates children. Here is his report on a current film:

I saw the movie at the Ziegfeld Theater, a nice place, lots of show biz memorabilia around in glass cases, too bad they've got pinball machines in the lobby. They don't make movie theaters like they did in my day.

The name of the film was *The Muppet Movie*, which made no sense to me — what's a muppet? Maybe they meant moppet and misspelled it, there were thousands of the nasty things all around, screaming and yelling as they are wont to do. The brats of my day never screamed and yelled at Shirley Temple movies.

This movie has the weirdest looking actors in it. Somebody told me they were from television; wouldn't you know? Television actors are very strange looking anyhow — that Farah Faucet Minor and that Henry Twinkler look like they were made in a plastic factory and I'd have never let them make a real movie — but these people in the moppet movie were really peculiar but it was a live-action movie not one of those animated sugar teats, so they must be real.

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There were some famous movie actors in it, too, like Orson Welles and Edgar Bergen and that funny new girl, what's her name, oh, yes, Madeline Kahn, but they were usually only on the screen for a second or two and most of the plot what there was of it was carried by this funny looking bunch from the television.

Now that I've mentioned the plot I guess I should say that it concerns how these strange people got to Hollywood and started their careers — Hollywood alas now produces television shows as well as movies. I don't know why Bared Cereals asked me to review the film here, it is certainly not science fiction or fantasy, well maybe fantasy in the way all these show biz success stories are fantasies, rags to riches or in this case I guess swamp to swank.

Because the movie starts in a swamp, well no it doesn't, it starts in a screening room where these actors are coming to see their own movie which is sort of silly; most actors see their movies in a screening room so what's the big deal? These were yelling and throwing popcorn around and one was eating the seat — that's the kind of thing that inspires the brats to do the same thing in real theaters and I hope they get good and sick from eating the seats. But the movie itself starts in a swamp, well, above it really with some nice aerial photography but then it pans down and we see the leading actor singing. He seems to have only one name like Capucine, in this case it's Kermit and he looks like a frog which is good because that's what he seems to be playing.

A movie agent comes along in a boat and tells him that there's auditions for frogs in Hollywood, and he could get fame and fortune and make lots of people happy, that last bit seems to get to him (urp) so he goes and the plot is about his trip. That's all there is to it except for a sort of subplot about a fast food entrepreneur who wants Kermit to go on television and advertise French fried frogs legs, which seems sort of sick, not just a frog advertising frogs legs which is akin to cannibalism, but going on television. So I felt a sort of sympathy there.

On the way to Hollywood he stops in all sorts of places like the El Sleazo, which is a bar, and that's where he runs into that funny new girl Kahn who is playing a lady no better than she should be and she says "Hello, sailor" which is a good line if inappropriate and then he meets another really strange looking person and the moppet in the next seat said Telly Savalas or was it Sally Tevelas? Anyhow, he is really strange looking but familiar so I guess he made movies before he went into television, but I'll say one thing, he looks more like a toad than this Kermit looks like a frog.

This Kermit meets a bear who tags along with him and tells bad jokes, in fact the two of them reminded me of Hope and Crosby in the Road pictures, because they kept making jokes about

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being in the movie you were seeing, and then *they* meet a lady who looks like a pig (Dietrich and Davis and Colbert were *individual* looking but they didn't look like pigs) and she was no lady either. And they all meet a rock and roll band that look like nothing I have ever seen in my life. And so it goes. They get to Hollywood, and Orson Welles who is playing the head of a studio like studios used to be takes one look at them and makes them stars. I guess it really is a fantasy.

I forgot to mention a person or thing named Gonzo and his chicken, and the songs of which there seem a lot and they're all pretty dull and treacly about rainbows and things. One is sort of nice where the piggie lady sings a love song to Kermit (and one shudders at the thought of *their* offsprings) and they do little fast take off scenes from old movies and run to each other in slow motion like in that Swedish Mozart movie, *Elvira Madigan*.

And Charlie McCarthy appeared once and didn't look a day older than he used to. One of those new people I did like, he is very tall and broad and seems to be named Jack, I predict a great future for him. He could be another Johnny Weismuller and with personality, too. Two of the people in the screening room were also OK. They were named Statler and Waldorf, and looked almost human, in fact one reminded me of me.

But in general, I didn't understand this movie at all. Why don't they make movies like *Sky Full of Moon* anymore? Back to Bared Cereals.

Bared Cereals here — I'm afraid I agree with the OMB, but for different reasons. What is wonderfully charming on a fast half-hour TV variety show doesn't seem to be able to sustain a plotted hour-and-a-half of film. And those songs....

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Barry Malzberg's new story is about sentient minerals, i.e., intelligent rubble. Or is it.

Demystification of Circumstance

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

Hawkins lay under a rock. The rock was ten feet tall and twenty across, perhaps three feet through, although depth was of no interest to him at this time. The facade was what concerned him. The rock, as all mineral formations on this minor asteroid ate and drank the atmosphere, conversed endlessly, seemed to have no need whatsoever of sleep. Perhaps at a later stage. It was apparently a very *young* rock. "You won't be able to keep this up much longer," it pointed out to Hawkins in its high flutelike voice. "Sooner or later you'll have to fall asleep and I'll gobble you up for a meal just like everything else. It's been twenty-two hours now and you're approaching your fatigue limits. Why don't you just tell me the attack plans and we can bring an end to all of this?"

"No," Hawkins said. He shook his head. His only hope was that his wrecked craft would be visually sighted and the rescue fleet would come but the administrators had, as the rock had pointed out, a major attack to worry about and would hardly be looking for an isolated scout at the present time. Nevertheless, pride held him back and an admiration for consistency: he would not be a traitor and reveal to the rock the exact time and nature of the attack, facts which were desperately needed, of course, so that the sentient minerals of this place, all in constant contact, could protect themselves. It would cost him his life, he knew; if he was not eventually eaten by the rock, which had pinioned him by his right ankle since he had crawled from the downed craft, he would perish in the attack itself ... but one had limits. You were what you were or nothing. "I won't tell you," he said, "and I really wish you'd stop with this incessant

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chatter. It won't get you anywhere, you know."

"Oh, it passes the time," the rock said cheerfully, "and besides it's keeping you awake. If you fall asleep for an instant, that's the end of you, you know. It isn't often that I get a chance to talk to a different life form, you understand, although I must say that I find you quite dull and so xenophobic about everything. Don't your kind do anything besides hate?"

"We hate the likes of you," Hawkins muttered. This was quite true; the sentient minerals of the Sirius asteroids had, for the last several decades, exerted powerful influence upon plans to profitably settle the terrain; they had eaten twenty or thirty explorers and had driven several hundred more, unprepared for singing stones and chattering boulders, quite mad; and they had then begun to transmit a series of ultimatums demanding that the Sirius system be abandoned. The circumstances left no alternative: a pulverizing attack had been planned and at this very moment several hundred ships were massing behind invisible screens to deliver the long delayed blow which would destroy all of the asteroids; but Hawkins, unfortunately, sweeping the terrain to see if the sentient minerals had devised any counterforce of their own, had had the misfortune to crash and to fall into the interrogative arms or, putting it another way, the interrogative ledge of the rock. The rock appeared to know that an attack was in the offing but, unless it could deduce the actual timing, could not mass defense, which meant that Hawkins's task was quite clear ... still, he was in an awkward position, quite tired and beginning to fear death more than he had thought was possible through his training. Perhaps it was because he did not think that he would end his life in early middle age bantering with a rock.

"You are so silly," the rock said, "you say that you understand everything but you understand nothing at all. Do you really think that we posed any danger to you? We merely did not like our own terrain being invaded, and you were conveying many of us to museums and laboratories for study. We have feelings, you know; we are just as viable as are you. Come on," the rock said innocently, "tell us the time and the nature of the attack. I'll release you and you can even call for help. There's no reason why you have to take such a stong position."

"No," Hawkins said again. For the hundredth time he put his hands around his ankle and squeezed, trying to free it from the obstruction formed at the interception of the ledge and surface, but it remained firmly in place. The surface, also sentient, grumbled in reproof, and Hawkins disgustedly gave up and tried to assume a more comfortable position. Circulation had been cut off for a long time, and he assumed that the foot was gangrenous and would probably have to be replaced, but this seemed to be the least of his

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problems at the present time. "You can't make me," he said, "at least I can hold onto that. I won't be a traitor."

"You're all so *stuffy*," the rock said after a pause. "You're so involved with abstractions, when what you should realize, as we have, is that your existence is the hub from which the spokes of all being radiate. But I guess you don't want to become philosophical."

"Definitely not," Hawkins said, "and I'm not a theoretical person, anyway."

"Which makes you dull for conversation," the rock said. It paused again, as it was wont to do; long periods would go by and then the dialogue would begin as if no time had elapsed at all. Perhaps the sentient minerals worked within a different frame or, then again, had to restock themselves. How they spoke, let alone in comprehensible language, was a mystery to Hawkins; he was not a technological sort, either, but more or less a simple man of action. "Anyway," the rock said after some time, "there is no need for any of this. Actually, we deduced the attack time and method some time ago. We simply put you into a semiconscious state and extracted the information under hypnosis, then removed the memory of that confession from you conscious mind so that when you awoke you thought of time as continuous and the information as secret. I've merely been going on in this fashion to amuse myself. As you can imagine, there isn't much to occupy the time here; we can't move around much, and very rarely is there anyone to talk to other than minerals who are all parts of the same intelligence."

"I don't believe you," Hawkins said.

"You wouldn't," said the rock, "and there's no reason why you should. But, really, does it make any difference whether you do or not? Whatever will happen has already happened; we believe in the inalterability of time and the absence of chaos, here. Note the firmament, for instance. Go on, your ankle has nothing to do with your line of sight. Look up there."

Hawkins did so, craning his neck at an uncomfortable angle. The bowl of the sky appeared to be lit with many small fires which alternately flared and sputtered, and beyond the fires he could see a deep golden haze. The haze shimmered toward transparency, and he thought he could see dimly the outlines of many ships.

"Our force screens," the rock said rather proudly. "They are being maintained in place by collective energy. At such time as detonating devices hit them, they will self-destruct and explode anything above them to a distance of five hundred miles. So much for your fleet."

"I don't believe you," Hawkins said weakly. "This is a hallucination. You're lying to me. You don't have the means to do this, and even if you did, I'd never under any kind of hypnosis

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betray the whereabouts of the fleet or the time of the attack. My conditioning forbids it."

The rock seemed to shrug, a difficult gesture without hands or shoulders, accomplished through shadow play, perhaps. "That may well be," it said. "All of this may be hallucinatory, conjured to impress you; but if we have the power to so hallucinate, we certainly have the power to extract secret material from your mind, wouldn't you think? You'd better face the realities of the matter," it said rather bitterly. "You're dealing with a superior form of life here and you always were. If you had shown us a little consideration, it wouldn't have come to this, but you regarded us as mere stones and rubble, curiosa for your technicians. But there are ultimate equalizing forces, and you had better face up to it; you weren't going to get away with this forever."

"I'm going to be in a great deal of trouble," Hawkins said. "They'll never forgive me for this." He wrenched his ankle free and stood, tottering. "What is this?" he said, only then the significance of this act reaching him. "What is going on here?"

"Oh, you were never really trapped," the rock said. "That was all in your imagination. You hallucinated imprisonment out of your subconscious guilt. You could have gone at any time, but you were driven by your own uncertainty to construct a situation where you would confess. As a matter of fact," the rock confided after another of its characteristic pauses, "your craft was never wrecked either. You landed here voluntarily and wandered over seeking to *betray* the time and nature of the attack. Of course your conscious mind couldn't handle that, and so you constructed a fantasy of wrecked craft, boulders and so on. Your defense mechanisms are amazing."

The flames sputtered above. Hawkins heard the dull boom of military. That was dumb, he thought at least in light of the repelling devices. If there *were* repelling devices. It all might be a lie, of course.

"In fact," the rock said with alarming casualness, you hallucinated sentience itself. We're perfectly inert and senseless; you've just projected upon us your own ambivalence about your course of conquest. Sorry to hit you with all this," the rock apologized as Hawkins scuttled desperately for cover. "I did want you to understand the truth before you destroy yourself."

Hawkins, thoroughly humiliated, clawed at the restored circulation in his ankle.

Meanwhile, the asteroid exploded.

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e are finally facing up to the fact that non-renewable sources energy are going to be very expensive before they run out, ıich makes this story — about what might have been — all the ɔre painful.

Well-Wisher

BY

BOB SHAW

·n Zuhain, Lord of the Long Valley, ked through the evening shade of private garden. Beyond its filigreed le walls the desert sand and rocks ıined the oven-fierce heat of the ', but within Zuhain's sanctum the was thick and fresh, seeded with isture from a centrally placed foun- ı of elaborate design. The water, wn from a deep-lying spring, was :old that as Zuhain approached the :ade he could feel himself breasting ıcentric rings of coolness. This, he :w, was yet another form of Allah's ınty, and he was smiling his appre- ion of it when he noticed a small e flask sitting on the fountain's ɔx rim.

He examined the bottle without ching it and saw it was a poor ıg, imperfectly glazed and sealed h resin, most certainly not one of own possessions. Its presence ant that an intruder had entered the private garden.

Zuhain sighed heavily, both irritated and saddened by the fact that he would now — on an evening which should have been entirely devoted to prayer and pleasure — have to order one or more executions. He had no relish for seeing trained servants beheaded, but they all knew the punishment for failing in any duty, and to withhold it would have to encourage sinful laxity.

Using a hem of his robe, Zuhain swept the offending bottle off his fountain and let it smash on the bright tesserae of the courtyard. He turned and strode away, intent on summoning the captain of his guard, but had taken only a few paces when — incredibly — a voice sounded behind him.

"Why such haste, my lord?" it said. "Are you so rich and powerful that there is nothing more in all of creation that you desire?"

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Zuhain swung round, his hand on the ornate dagger at his waist, and saw a tall man of Persian or Indian appearance regarding him with a smile. The stranger's calm, relaxed manner was both an insult and a threat — an assassin had to be very sure of himself to retain such composure — and Zuhain glanced about him, wondering if all his guards and servants could have been overpowered without his knowing.

"I am alone and wish you no harm," the stranger said, apparently divining Zuhain's thoughts.

"Tell me why you are here — before I have the pleasure of slaying you," Zuhain said.

"From me you can have the pleasure of three gifts — anything you desire — but nothing more." The stranger was standing close to the fountain and its spray shimmered colorfully all around him, making it difficult to see him clearly.

"You may be alone, but I am not," Zuhain assured him, "and from me you can have but one gift — that of death."

"Death? For me?" The stranger's smile grew broader. "The lord of the Long Valley must be a powerful ruler, indeed."

"Where have you come from?" Zuhain snapped, not liking the other's manner.

The stranger disturbed some blue shards with his sandal. "Must you ask?"

"I must."

"Then there can be no answ
Come, my lord, my time is short
state your first wish."

"My first...." Zuhain narrowed
eyes, trying to eliminate the lumin
haze which blurred the intruder's o
lines, and old memories began to s
He held up his left hand, which h
been injured eight years earlier a
since that time, despite all the efforts
his physicians, had steadily withe
into the semblance of a mummif
claw.

"Restore this hand," he said, "ar
will know who — or what — you ar

"It is done," the stranger repl
carelessly.

Zuhain opened his hand, the
gers spreading like the petals of a lo
dormant flower, and comprehens
blossomed likewise in his mind. A
was indeed favoring him above
other men, for here was his chanc
be young again and — with the vi
of youth allied to the wisdom of ag
to spread his kingdom to the limit
Islam and far beyond. Much thoug
wanted to shed the burden of
years, however, Zuhain's restless m
was drawn by another and, to h
more alluring prospect. History
one of the passions of which he
still capable, and he devoted himsel
it, not for what it taught him about
past, but for what it enabled him
teach himself about the future. He
the world as being in a state of con
uous change, and it was one of
principal regrets that life was too s

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allow more than a glimpse of the ighty spectacle of the Sons of the rophet triumphantly carrying the true ith to the ends of the earth. But now, ddenly, it was within his power to ar like an eagle above the hidden ndscapes of times to come.

"Tell me," Zuhain said to the ranger, "what is your name?"

The tall figure's eyes gleamed. "Is at your second wish?"

"Do not jest with me."

"Very well, my lord — you can call e Emad."

Zuhain pointed at him with a eady finger. "Emad, I command you show me the world as it will be a ousand years from this day."

The stranger shook his head. "It ould be well for you to understand at I cannot be commanded to do ything — not even by the Lord of e Long Valley. I am required only to ant you three wishes."

"Is it within your power to show e the world as it will be?"

"It is — but is that your second ish?"

"That is my ... wish."

"Very well, my lord. *See!*"

Emad gestured at the floor of the urtyard between them, and sudden- the mosaic designs began to move, quiring the fluidity and depth of a ear and sunlit sea. Zuhain found him- lf looking down on the familiar hills d valleys which surrounded his own pital, but vast and disturbing chang- had been wrought. Of the thriving center of commerce nothing remained but a scattering of shabby, ill-constructed huts, and the once-busy harbor had degenerated into a refuge for a handful of neglected fishing boats. Most vexatious was the fact that on the site of his own palace there remained nothing but a vague outline of the foundations, with streamers of white sand drifting across them like smoke.

Under Zuhain's mesmerized gaze the scene began to shift, and within the space of a few minutes he had visited all the far-flung territories of his forefathers and had ranged beyond them to the ocean of the east and the narrow sea of the west. In all of Arabia the picture was the same — one of poverty and degradation, of wasted farming lands, of sparse, dispirited communities in which the people scratched for a living amid the ruins of their former greatness.

"What devil's trick is this?" Zuhain's voice was cold. "What false visions are you showing me?"

"I have nothing to gain by deceiving you," Emad said emotionlessly, though his eyes had flashed again in what might have been anger. "This is your world as it will be a thousand years hence. This, Ibn Zuhain, Lord of the Long Valley, is the extent of your achievement."

"I warn you," Zuhain whispered fiercely, "your tawdry tricks will not avail you if...." He paused for a moment, his attention caught by a detail in one of the bright panoramas unfold-

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ing below. A caravan was climbing a mountain road, and to Zuhain's amazement he discerned that it was composed of large wheeled vehicles which moved — as though by magic — without the aid of any beast of burden. On the side of each vehicle was a white square upon which had been painted a red cross. The scene expanded until Zuhain could clearly see men inside the marvelous conveyances, and his nostrils flared as he realized they were infidels — sleek, well-fed, arrogant infidels, journeying without fear where they would once have been cut down and fed to dogs.

"What now?" Zuhain breathed. "What is the meaning of this?"

"It is quite simple, my lord." A hint of malice was now audible in Emad's voice. "The world is very large, and it has many lands where the sun does not burn so furiously, where there is water in abundance — and the future belongs to the peoples of those green lands."

"Do not lie to me," Zuhain commanded, gripping his dagger.

"See for yourself, Ibn Zuhain." Emad moved his right arm and the conjured scenes began to change with bewildering rapidity. Zuhain's senses were numbed by the succession of glowing images of proud, teeming cities, endless expanses of ripening crops, lush forests, bustling ports. And everywhere he looked great vehicles of commerce plied the roads, huge ships moved on the surface of the oceans without wind or sail, and he even saw machines which flew above the clouds like meta birds. The pageant was one of wealth luxury and power.

"I hope my lord is satisfied," Ema said pointedly, showing signs of impa tience. He gestured again with his arm and the floor of the courtyard returne to its former solidity. "It is time fo your third wish."

"Not yet." Zuhain considered wha he had seen, and his mind, skilled i the grasping of essentials, returned t the one factor which had been com mon to all the visions laid out befor him. "Those ships I saw, the wagons the machines which flew — what mad them move? I saw no sails, no horse or camels, no tethered birds."

"All conveyances will prop themselves by means of engines."

"That is no explanation — wha force is harnessed?"

"The force of the blue crystals, m lord."

"What crystals do you speak o Sapphires? Amethysts?"

"You have no name for them b cause, although they are plentiful i other lands, almost none can be foun throughout the length and breadth of Is lam. Suffice it to say that the blue crys tals have a power which in one respec is even greater than mine — they can not be confined. Place one in the stou est bottle or brass-bound cask and will soon burst the top or sides. And a you have seen, men will learn to ha ness that power and make it serve ther in many ways. In that age the lowlie

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peasants will be as rich as princes.

"And now," Emad concluded, "for your third and final wish. I assume that, like all the others, you desire the restoration of your youth and virility."

"Not so quickly — I saw no riches in my domain, nor in any part of Arabia."

"I have explained that the blue crystals are not found here, but do not alarm yourself, my lord." Emad's voice had taken on a caressing quality. "The other nations will be generous with gifts of food and medicine. Your children will not be allowed to starve."

Zuhain partially drew his dagger. "If you value your life, dog, do not speak in that manner."

"I tremble," Emad replied sarcastically, drawing himself up until he stood almost as high as the garden's central fountain. "Hurry, old man, state your wish. How young do you wish to be? Twenty? Fifteen?"

"As you say, I am an old man," Zuhain replied, checking his anger. "There is little time remaining to me, and it would be good to taste the sweet honey of youth once more — but what is a lifetime when measured against eternity? The seventy years you offer will draw to a close just as surely as those I have already spent."

"What if I offer you eternal life?"

"I have no desire to be forever denied entrance to Paradise."

"You are a fool, Ibn Zuhain," said Emad. "What, then, is your last wish?"

"I command you to rid this world of your accursed blue crystals and give me an equally powerful talisman in their place."

There was a pause before Emad replied, and when he did so his voice seemed hushed. "Even for you, even for the Lord of the Long Valley, such ambition is too...."

"Do as I say!" Zuhain thundered, drawing his dagger and throwing it at the towering silhouette. There was a flash, a ripple of shadow across the sky, and Emad was gone.

Zuhain looked all about him, anxious to behold the treasure for which he had eschewed eternal youth, and his shoulders sagged as he realized he had been betrayed. There was no treasure, no glittering talisman which would give his descendants the key to the wonderful future he had glimpsed. It occurred to him that he would have gained much had he treated Emad with politeness and consideration, but that had never been his way.

Dejected and angry, lost in his thoughts, Zuhain turned to leave the private garden, and at that moment there came a subtle alteration to the music of the high fountain. He looked at it and his eyes narrowed in fury as he appreciated the full extent of the jinn's trickery and malice.

The clear water of the fountain — solace of his fading years — had dried up, and in its place there gouted forth a black and evil-smelling oil which, already, had begun to disfigure everything in its vicinity.

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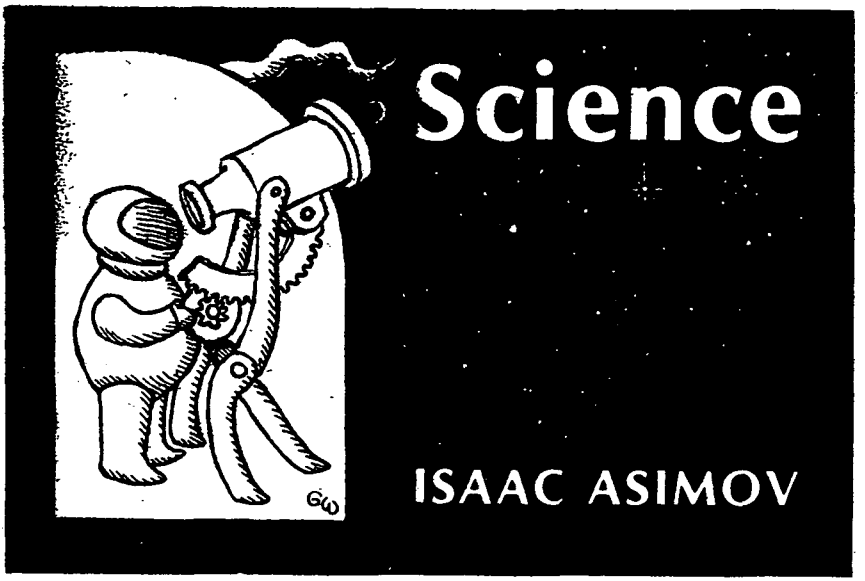

THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT

As you all know, I like to start at the beginning. This occasionally upsets people, which is puzzling.

After all, the most common description I hear of my writing is that "Asimov makes complex ideas easy to understand." If that is so, might it not have something to do with the fact that I start at the beginning?

Yet editors who are publishing my material for the first time sometimes seem taken aback by a beginning at the beginning and ask for a "lead."

Even editors who have had experience with me sometimes feel a little uneasy. I was once asked to write a book about the neutrino, for instance, and I jumped at the chance. I even thought up a catchy title for it. I called it "The Neutrino."

I began the book by describing the nature of the great generalizations we call the laws of nature. I talked about things like the conservation of energy, the conservation of momentum and so on. I pointed out that these laws were so useful that when an observed phenomenon went against one of them, it was necessary to make every reasonable effort to make the phenomenon fit the law before scrapping the whole thing and starting over.

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All this took up precisely half the book. I was then ready to consider a certain phenomenon that broke not one conservation law, but three of them, and pointed out that by postulating the existence of a particle called the neutrino, with certain specified properties, all three conservation laws could be saved at one stroke.

It was because I had carefully established the foundation, that it become possible to introduce the neutrino as an "of course" object with everyone nodding their heads and seeing nothing mysterious in supposing it to exist, or in the fact that it was only detected twenty-five years after its existence had been predicted.

With considerable satisfaction, I entitled Chapter 7, "Enter the Neutrino."

And, in the margin, my editor pencilled, "At last!!!"

So now I will consider some aspects of the neutrino that have achieved prominence after I wrote that book. And again, I warn you it will take me a little time to get to the neutrino.

The Sun shines bright because some of its mass is continually being converted into energy. In fact, the Sun, in order to continue to shine in its present fashion, must lose 4,200,000,000 kilograms of mass every second.

At first blush, that makes it seem as though the Sun doesn't have long for this Universe. *Billions* of kilograms every *second?*

There are just about 31,557,000 seconds in one year, and the Sun has been shining, in round numbers, for 5,000,000,000 years. This means that in its lifetime (if we assume it has been shining in precisely the same way as it now is for all that time) the Sun must have lost something like 158,000,000,000,000,000 kilograms of mass altogether.

In that case, why is it still here? Because there's so much of it, that's why.

All that mass-loss I have just described, over its first five billion years of existence, represents only a ten-trillionth of the total mass of the Sun. If the Sun were to continue losing mass in this fashion and if it were to continue shining as it does today in consequence, it would last (if mass-loss were the only requirement) for over sixty billion trillion years before snuffing out like a candle-flame.

The trouble is, the Sun isn't simply losing mass; it is doing so as the result of specific nuclear reactions. These nuclear reactions take place in a fairly complicated manner, but the net result is that hydrogen is converted to helium. To be more specific, four hydrogen nuclei, each one consisting

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of a single proton, are converted into a single helium nucleus consisting of two protons and two neutrons.

The mass of a proton is (in the standard units of mass used today*) 1.00797, and four of them would consequently have a mass of 4.03188. The mass of a helium nucleus is 4.00260. In converting four hydrogen nuclei into a helium nucleus, there is thus a loss of 0.0293 units of mass, or 0.727 percent of the mass of the four protons.

In other words, we can't expect the Sun to lose mass until all the mass is gone. It will only lose 0.727 percent of its mass as all the hydrogen is converted into helium. (It can lose a bit more mass by converting helium into still more complicated nuclei, but this additional loss is small in comparison to the hydrogen-to-helium loss and we can ignore it. We can also ignore the small losses involved in maintaining the solar wind.)

Right now, in order for it to shine bright, the Sun is converting 580,000,000,000 kilograms of hydrogen into helium every second.

If the Sun had started its life as pure hydrogen and if it consumed hydrogen at this same steady rate always, then its total lifetime before the last dregs of hydrogen would be consumed would still be something like a hundred billion years.

To be sure, we suspect that the Sun was formed as something less than pure hydrogen. The composition of the original cloud that formed it seems to have already been 20 percent helium. Even so, there seems to be enough hydrogen in the Sun to keep it going for 75 billion years at its present rate.

And yet it won't continue that long at its present rate, not nearly. The Sun will continue to shine in more or less its present fashion for only about 7 billion years perhaps. Then, at its core, which will be growing larger and hotter all that time, helium will start to fuse, and this will initiate a series of changes that will cause the Sun to expand into a red giant and, eventually, to collapse.

Even when it begins to collapse, there will still be plenty of hydrogen left. In fact, a star large enough to form a supernova shines momentarily as bright as a wholy galaxy of stars because so much of the hydrogen it *still* possesses goes off all at once.

Clearly, if we are going to understand the future of the Sun, we must know more than its content of hydrogen and the present rate of hydrogen loss. We must know a great deal about the exact details of what is going on in its core right now so that we may know what will be going on in the future.

See THE WEIGHTING GAME, F&SF, April 1962

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Let's tackle the matter from a different angle. If four protons are converted to a two-proton-two-neutron helium nucleus, then two of the original protons must be converted to neutrons.

Of the 580,000,000,000 kilograms of hydrogen being turned to helium every second, half, or 290,000,000,000 kilograms, represents protons that are being turned to neutrons.

There are, as it happens, just about 600,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 protons in every kilogram of hydrogen, a figure it is easier to represent as 6×10^{26}. That means that there are, roughly, 1.75×10^{38} protons in 290,000,000,000 kilograms, or, if you want it in an actual string: 175,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

In the core of the Sun then, 1.75×10^{38} protons are being converted to 1.75×10^{38} neutrons every second. That is what makes it possible for you to get a nice suntan on the beach; or, if you want to be lugubrious about it, that is what makes it possible for life to exist.

A proton doesn't change to a neutron just like that, however. The proton has a positive electric charge and the neutron is uncharged. By the law of conservation of electric charge that positive charge can't disappear into nothingness. For that reason, when a proton is converted to a neutron, a positron is also formed. The positron is a light particle, with only 1/1811 the mass of a proton, but it carries exactly the positive electric charge of a proton.

But then, the positron can not be formed all by itself, either. It is a particle of a kind that exists in two varieties, "leptons" and "antileptons." If a particle of one of those varieties is formed, then a particle of the other variety must also be formed. This is called "the law of conservation of lepton number." This conservation law comes in two varieties, the conservation of electron-family number and the conservation of muon-family number.*

The positron is an example of an antilepton of the electron family. We have to form a lepton of the electron family to balance it. The neutron and the positron, in forming, have consumed all the mass and electric charge in the original proton, so the balancing lepton must have neither mass nor charge. It must, however, have certain quantities of energy, angular momentum and so on.

The lepton that is formed to balance the positron is the massless, chargeless, neutrino.

**There might conceivably be an infinite number of other such lepton-families each with its conservation law, but we needn't worry about that here.*

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At the core of the Sun, then, there are formed, every second, 1.75 X 10^{38} positrons and 1.75 X 10^{38} neutrinos.

We can ignore the positrons. They remain inside the Sun, bouncing off other particles, being absorbed, re-emitted, changed.

The neutrinos, however, are a different matter. Without mass and without charge, they are not affected by three of the four types of interaction that exist in the Universe — the strong, the electromagnetic, and the gravitational. They are affected only by the weak interaction.

The weak interaction decreases in intensity so rapidly with increasing distance that the neutrino must be nearly in contact with some other particle in order to be influenced by that weak interaction. As it happens, though, the neutrion behaves as though it has a diameter of 10^{-21} centimeters, which is a hundred-millionth the width of a proton or neutron. It can therefore slip easily through matter without disturbing it. And even if it does happen to approach an atomic nucleus, a neutrino is massless and therefore moving at the speed of light. Unlike the rather slow-moving protons and neutrons, a neutrino doesn't stay in the neighborhood of another particle for longer than 10^{-23} seconds.

The consequence is that a neutrino virtually never interacts with any other particle but streaks through solid matter as though it were a vacuum. A beam of neutrinos can pass through a light-year of solid lead and emerge scarcely attenuated.

This means that the neutrinos formed at the center of the Sun are not absorbed, re-emitted or changed in any significant manner. Indifferent to their surroundings, the neutrinos move out of the Sun's core in all directions, at the speed of light. In three seconds after formation, the neutrinos formed at the Sun's core reach the Sun's surface and move out into space. The Sun is therefore emitting 1.75 X 10^{38} neutrinos into space every second and, presumably, in every direction equally.

In a matter of eight minutes after formation, these solar neutrinos are 150,000,000 kilometers from the Sun, and that happens to be the distance at which the Earth orbits the Sun.

Not all the solar neutrinos reach the Earth, however, because not all happen to have been moving in the direction of the Earth. The solar neutrinos can be envisaged, eight minutes after formation, as moving through a huge hollow sphere with its center at the Sun's center and its radius equal to 150,000,000 kilometers. The surface area of such a sphere is about 2.8 X 10^{17} square kilometers.

If the solar neutrinos are moving in all directions equally, then through

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every square kilometer of that imaginary sphere there are passing 6.3 X 10^{20} neutrinos. There are ten billion (10^{10}) square centimeters in every square kilometer, and so 6.3 X 10^{10} (sixty-three billion) neutrinos pass through every square centimeter of that imaginary sphere every second.

Part of the sphere is occupied by the Earth. The Earth has a radius of 6,378 kilometers, so that its cross-sectional area is roughly 128,000,000 square kilometers or about 1/2,000,000 of the total imaginary sphere surrounding the Sun.

A total of about 80,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 solar neutrinos are passing through the Earth every second, day and night, year in, year out.

And how many do you get? Well, a human being is irregular in shape. To simplify matters, let us suppose a human being is a parallelopiped who is 170 centimeters tall, 35 centimeters wide and 25 centimeters thick. The smallest cross-section would be 35 X 25 or 875 square centimeters and the greatest cross-section would be 35 X 170 or 5,950 square centimeters. The actual cross-section presented by a human being to the neutrino stream would depend on his or her orientation with respect to the Sun.

Let's suppose that 3400 square centimeters represent a reasonable average cross-section presented to the neutrino stream. In that case, a little over 200,000,000,000,000 (two hundred trillion) solar neutrinos are passing through your body every second. —Without bothering you in any way.

To be sure, every once in a while, a neutrino *will* just happen to strike an atomic nucleus squarely enough to interact and induce a nuclear reaction that would be the reverse of one that would have produced a neutrino. The conversion of a proton to a neutron produces a neutrino, so the absorption of a neutrino converts a neutron to a proton. The emission of a neutrino is accompanied by the emission of a positron. The absorption of a neutrino is accompanied by the emission of an electron, which is the opposite of a positron.

In the human body there may be one neutrino absorbed every fifty years, but physicists can set up more efficient absorbing mechanisms.

If a neutrino strikes a nucleus of chlorine-37 (17 protons, 20 neutrons), then one of the neutrons will be converted to a proton, and argon-37 (18 protons, 19 neutrons), along with an electron, will be formed.

To make this process detectable, you need a lot of chlorine-37 atoms in close proximity so that a measurable number of them will be hit. Chlorine-37 makes up one-fourth of the atoms of the element chlorine. As

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a gas, chlorine is mostly empty space, and to liquefy it and bring its two-atom molecules into contact requires high pressure, low temperature or both. It is easier to use perchloroethylene, which is a liquid at ordinary temperature and pressure and which is made up of molecules that each contain two carbon atoms and four chlorine atoms. The presence of the carbon atoms does not interfere, and perchloroethylene is reasonably cheap.

Of course, you want a lot of perchloroethylene: 100,000 gallons of it, in fact. You also want it somewhere where *only* neutrinos will hit it, so you put it a mile deep in a gold mine in South Dakota. Nothing from outer space, not even the strongest cosmic ray particles will blast through the mile of rock to get at the perchloroethylene. Nothing except neutrinos. They will slide through the rock as though it weren't there and hit the perchloroethylene.

What about the traces of radioactivity in the rocks all around the perchloroethylene. Well, you surround the vat with water to absorb any stray radioactive radiations.

In 1968, Raymond Davis, Jr. did all this and began capturing neutrinos. Not many. Every couple of days he would capture *one* in all those gallons of perchloroethylene. He would let the captures accumulate, then use helium gas to flush out any argon atoms that had formed. The few argon-37 atoms could be counted with precision because they are radioactive.

There was a surprise, though. Neutrinos were captured — but not enough. Davis got only one-sixth the neutrinos he expected in his early observations. After he plugged every last loophole and worked at it for ten years, he was able to get the number up to one-third of what was expected, but not more.

But then, it is exciting to have something unexpectedly go wrong!

If the experiment had worked perfectly, scientists would only know that their calculations were correct. They would be gratified but would be no further ahead.

Knowing that something is wrong means that they must return to the old drawing-board, go over what it was they thought they knew. If they could modify their theory to explain the anomalous observation, they might find that the new (and presumably better) theory could, perhaps quite unexpectedly, explain other mysteries as well.

Yes, but how explain the anomaly?

All sorts of things are being suggested. Perhaps the theory of neutrino formation is wrong. Perhaps neutrinos aren't stable. Perhaps there are factors in the core of the Sun, mixing effects or non-mixing effects, that we

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aren't taking into account. Perhaps the Sun has even stopped working for some reason and eventually the change will reach the surface and it will no longer shine bright and we will all die.

In science, however, we try to find the least adjustment of theory that will explain an anomaly, so before we kill the Sun, let's think a little.

According to our theories, the hydrogen doesn't change directly into helium. If that were so, all the neutrinos formed would be of the same energy. What does happen, is that the hydrogen turns to helium by way of a number of changes that take place at different speeds, some of the changes representing alternate pathways. Neutrinos are produced at different stages of the process, and every nuclear change that produces a neutrino produces one with a characteristic energy.

The result is that of the many billions of neutrinos constantly passing through any object, a certain percentage have this much energy, a certain percentage have that much, and so on. There's a whole spectrum of energy distribution to the neutrinos, and the exact nature of the spectrum mirrors the exact details of the route taken from hydrogen to helium. Any change in the route will produce a characteristic change in the spectrum.

Naturally, the more energetic a neutrino, the more likely it is to induce a nuclear change, and the perchloroethylene detects only the most energetic neutrinos. It detects only those produced by one particular step in the conversion of hydrogen to helium. That one particular step is the conversion of boron-8 to beryllium-8.

The neutrinos formed by any other reaction taking place in the overall hydrogen-helium conversion do not contribute significantly to the absorptions in the perchloroethylene tank. The deficiency in solar neutrinos detected by Davis is therefore a deficiency in the boron-beryllium conversion and nothing more.

How can we be sure that our theory is correct about the details of what is going on in the Sun's core? How can we be sure that Davis should have observed three times as many neutrinos as he did?

We can't after all check how much boron-8 is actually present in the Sun and how rapidly and energetically it breaks down to beryllium-8. Our theory concerning that depends on determining reaction rates under laboratory conditions and then extrapolating them to conditions at the Sun's core. By working with these extrapolated reaction rates, we can calculate out a number of reactions that one way or another contribute to the formation of boron-8 and in this way determine its overall concentration. But what if we're not extrapolating properly?

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After all, the nuclear reaction rates may depend quite strongly on the temperature and pressure within the Sun and how sure can we be that we're not a bit off on the temperature or pressure or both.

In order to be able to talk sensibly about the neutrinos detected by Davis — whether they're too many, too few or just right — we really need to know more about the conditions at the core of the Sun, and the only way we can do that more accurately than by long-range and difficult calculations from observations at laboratory conditions, is to study the entire neutrino spectrum.

If we could study the entire neutrino spectrum, we might be able to deduce from that the various individual steps in the hydrogen-helium conversion, and the concentrations and breakdown speeds of all the various nuclear intermediates.

If this relatively direct knowledge of the Sun's core doesn't gibe with the extremely indirect knowledge based on extrapolation from laboratory experiments, then we will have to accept the former, re-examine the latter and develop, perhaps, new concepts and new rules for nuclear reactions.

In short, instead of learning about the Sun's core from our own surroundings, as we have been trying to do hitherto, we may end up learning about our own surroundings from the Sun's core.

To get the full spectrum, we will need detecting devices other than perchloroethylene. We will need a variety of "neutrino telescopes."

One possibility is that of making use of gallium-71 (31 protons, 40 neutrons), which makes up 40 percent of the element gallium as it occurs in nature. Neutrino absorption would convert it to radioactive germanium-71 (32 protons, 39 neutrons).

You would need about 50 tons of gallium-71 if you wanted to trap one solar neutrino per day. That is only one-twelfth of the mass of the 100,000 gallons of perchloroethylene, but the gallium is much more than twelve times as expensive. In fact that much gallium would cost about 25 million dollars right now.

Gallium is liquid at temperatures well below the boiling point of water so that germanium-71 can be flushed out without too much trouble. The advantage of gallium over perchloroethylene is that gallium will detect neutrinos of lower energy than perchloroethylene will.

Ramaswamy S. Raghavan at Bell Laboratories suggested something even more exciting, perhaps, in 1977. He suggested that indium-115 (49 protons, 66 neutrons) be used as a neutrino absorber. Indium-115 makes up

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96 percent of the natural metal, and when it absorbs a neutrino, it is converted to tin-115, which is stable. The tin-115, however, is produced in an excited state (that is, high-energy), and it gives up that energy and returns to normal by emitting two gamma rays of characteristic energies a few millionths of a second after being formed. In addition, there is the inevitable electron that is hurled out of the indium-115 nucleus.

The formation of an electron and two gamma rays at virtually the same time is, in itself, sufficient indication of neutrino capture, and there would be no necessity to isolate the atoms of tin-115.

What's more, by measuring the energy of the electron hurled out of the indium-115 nucleus, one could determine the energy of the incoming neutrino. The indium detector could thus give us our first picture of the neutrino spectrum as a whole.

And more, too. After all, how do we really know the neutrinos detected by Davis came from the Sun? Suppose there is some other source we're unaware of, and suppose we're getting nothing from the Sun.

In the case of the indium detector, the fleeing electrons will move pretty much in line with the incoming neutrino. If the line of motion of the electron, extended backward, points toward the Sun, no matter what time of day it is, it will be a fair conclusion that the neutrinos are indeed coming from the Sun.

Working up a system that will detect gamma rays and electrons, and measuring the direction and energy of them won't be easy, but it probably can be done. About four tons of indium-115 would be needed to detect one neutrino a day, and overall cost might be 10 million dollars.

It will take some years to set up these detection devices, but I feel that as neutrino telescopes are devised and improved, the resulting science of "neutrino astronomy" may end up revolutionizing our knowledge of the Universe in the same way that light telescopes did after 1609 and radio telescopes did after 1950.

ANSWER TO OCTOBER ACROSTIC PUZZLE

Quotation: Bella smiled up at him and bit at her dyed lips. Having them dyed hadn't really made her look twenty years younger — or even a year younger. She moved closer to his side, put lean, grayish fingers on his thick brown arm, looking up the dark ravine of the stairway.

Author(s) and work: Keith Laumer, Rosel G. Brown, EARTHBLOOD.

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Here is a first rate sf tale about a conflict among human and alien and a life-form somewhere in between. Vonda McIntyre's DREAMSNAKE won the SFWA Nebula award for best novel of 1978. The story you are about to read is the title story in a new collection, FIREFLOOD AND OTHER STORIES, to be published shortly by Houghton Mifflin.

Fireflood

BY

VONDA N. MCINTYRE

Dark moved slowly along the bottom of a wide, swift river, pushing against its current. The clean water made long bubbling strokes over her armor, and round stones scraped against her belly-scales. She could live here, hidden in rapids or pools, surfacing every few hours to replenish her internal supplies of oxygen, looking little different from a huge boulder. In time she could even change the color of her armor to conform perfectly to the lighter, grayer rock of this region. But she was moving on; she would not stay in the river long enough to alter her rust-red hue.

Vibrations warned her of rapids. She took more care with her hand- and foot-holds, though her own mass was her main anchor. Stones rumbling gradually downstream did not afford much purchase for her claws. The turbulence was treacherous and exciting. But now she had to work harder to go upstream, and the riverbed shifted more easily beneath her. As the water grew swifter it also became more shallow, and when she sensed a number of huge boulders around her, she turned her back to the flow and reared up above the surface to breathe.

The force of the current sent water spraying up over her back, forming a curtain that helped conceal her. She breathed deeply, pumping air through her storage lungs, forcing herself not to exceed her body's most efficient speed. However anxious she was to get under water again, she would do herself no good if she used up more oxygen than she stored during the stop.

Dark's armor, though impenetrable and insensitive to pain, detected other sensations. She was constantly aware of the small point of heat — call it that, she had no more accurate word — in

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the center of her spinal ridge. It was a radio transceiver. Though she could choose not to hear its incoming messages, it sent out a permanent beacon of her presence that she could not stop. It was meant to bring her aid in emergencies, but she did not want to be found. She wanted to escape.

Before she had properly caught her breath, she sensed the approach of a helicopter, high above and quite far away. She did not see it: the spray of water glittered before her short-sighted eyes. She did not hear it: the rush of the river drowned out all other sounds. But she had more than one sense that had as yet no name.

When she sensed the helicopter, she let herself sink beneath the water. An observer would have had to watch a single boulder among many to see what had happened. If the searchers had not homed in on the transmitter she could still get away.

She turned upstream again and forged ahead toward the river's source.

If she was very lucky, the helicopter was flying a pattern and had not actually spotted her transmitter at all. That was a possibility, for while it did not quite have the specificity of a laser, it worked on a narrow beam. It was designed to send signals via satellite.

But the beam did not pass through water and even as the searchers could not sense her, she could not see or feel them through the rough silver surface of the river. Trusting her luck, she continued on.

The country was very different from where she had trained. Though she was much more comfortable underground than underwater, this land was not ideal for digging. She could survive as well beneath liquid, and travel was certainly quicker. If she could not get to the surface to breathe, the hibernation she would need to extract oxygen directly was about the same. But the character of water was far too constant for her taste. Its action was predictable and its range of temperature was trivial compared to what she could stand. She preferred to go underground, where excitement spiced the exploration. For, though she was slow, methodical, and nearly indestructable, she *was* an explorer. It was just that now she had nowhere to explore.

She wondered if any of her friends had made it this far. She and six others had decided, in secret, to flee. But they offered each other only moral support; each had gone out alone. Twenty more of her kind still remained scattered in their reserve, waiting for assignments that would never come and pretending they had not been abandoned.

Though it was not yet evening, the light faded around her and left the river bottom gray and black. Dark slowly and cautiously lifted her eyes above the water. She was still bilaterally symmetrical: that much of her humanity she retained. But she no longer looked human. Her eyes peered darkly from beneath her armor. They were

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dark blue, almost black, the only thing of beauty about her: the only thing of beauty about her after or before her transformation. Even now she was not sorry to have volunteered for the change. It did not further isolate her; she had always been alone. She had also been useless. In her new life, she had some worth.

The river bed had cut between tall, thick trees that shut out much of the sunlight. Dark did not know for certain if they would interfere with the radio signal as well. She had not been designed to work among lush vegetation and she had never studied how her body might interact with it. But she did not believe it would be safe for her to take a quiet stroll between the giant cedars. She tried to get her bearings, with sun-time and body memory. Her ability to detect magnetic fields was worthless on earth; that sense was designed for more delicate signals. She closed it off as she might shut her eyes to a blinding light.

Dark submerged again and followed the river upward, keeping to its main branch. As she passed the tributaries that ran and rushed to join the primary channel the river became no more than a stream itself, and Dark was protected only by thin ripples.

She peered out again.

The pass across the ridge lay only a little ahead and above her, just beyond the spring that created the river. To Dark's left lay a wide field of scree, where a cliff and hillside had collapsed. The river flowed around the pile, having been displaced by tons of broken stone. The rubble stretched on quite a way, at least as far as the pass and, if she were lucky, all the way through. It was ideal. Sinking barely underwater, she moved across the current. Beneath her feet she felt the stones change from rounded and water-worn to sharp and freshly broken. She reached the edge of the slope, where the shattered rock projected into the river. On the downstream side she nudged away a few large stones, set herself, and burrowed quickly into the shards.

The fractured crystalline matrix disrupted her echo perception. She kept expecting to meet a wall of solid rock that would push her out and expose her, but the good conditions existed all the way through the pass. Then, on the other side, when she chanced a peek out into the world, she found that the texture of the ground changed abruptly on this side of the ridge. When the broken stone ended, she did not have to seek out another river. She dug straight from the scree into the earth.

In the cool dry darkness, she travelled more slowly but more safely than in the river. Underground there was no chance of the radio signal's escaping to give her away. She knew exactly where the surface was all the time. It, unlike the interface of water and air, did not constantly change. Barring the collapse of a hillside, little could unearth her. A landslide was possible, but her sonar

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could detect the faults and weaknesses in earth and rock that might create a danger.

She wanted to rest, but she was anxious to reach the flyers' sanctuary as quickly as she could. She did not have much farther to go. Every bit of distance might make a difference, for she would be safe only after she got inside the boundaries.... She could be safe there from normal people: what the flyers would do when she arrived she could not say.

Dark's vision ranged much farther through the spectrum than it had when she was human. In daytime she saw colors, but at night and underground she used infra-red, which translated to distinguishable and distinctive shades of black. They were supposed to look like colors, but she saw them all as black. They told her what sort of land she was passing through and a great deal about what grew above. Nevertheless, when the sun went down she broke through thick turf and peered around at the forest. The moon had not yet risen, and a nearby stream was almost as dark as ice. The fir trees kept the same deep tone as in bright sunlight. Still, all the colors were black.

Dark breathed deeply of the cold air. It was stuffy underground, though she had not had to switch to reducing her own oxygen. That was for deeper down, in altogether more difficult regions.

The air smelled of moss and ferns, evergreen trees, and weathered stone. But under it all was the sulphurous volcano, and the sweet delicate fragrance of flyers.

Sinking down into the earth once more, Dark traveled on.

The closer Dark got to the volcano, the more jumbled and erratic grew the strata. Lava flows and land movement, glaciers and erosion had scarred and unsettled and twisted the surface and all that lay beneath it. Deep underground, Dark encountered a tilted slab of granite, too hard for her to dig through quickly. She followed it upward, hoping it would twist and fold back down again. But it did not, and she broke through topsoil into the chill silence of a wilderness night. Dirt and pebbles fell away from her shoulder armor. From the edge of the outcropping she looked out, in infra-red, over her destination.

The view excited her. The tree-covered slope dropped to tumbled masses of blackened logs that formed the first barrier against intrusion into the flyers' land. Beyond, at the base of the volcano, solidified lava created another wasteland. The molten rock had flowed from the crater down the flank of the mountain; near the bottom it broke into two branches and ran one to each side, until both ended, like true rivers, in the sea. The northern shore was very close, and the pale nighttime waves lapped gently on the dim cool

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beach. To the south the lava had crept through a longer sweep of forest, burning the trees in its path and toppling those beyond its heat, for a much longer distance to the ocean. The wide solid flood and the impenetrable wooden jumble formed a natural barricade. The flyers were exiled to their peninsula, but they stayed there by choice. The humans had no way of containing them short of killing them. They could take back their wings or chain them to the ground or imprison them, but they wished to isolate the flyers, not murder them. And murder it would be if they denied the creatures flight.

The basalt streams glowed with heat retained from the day, and the volcano itself was a softly radiant cone, sparkling here and there where upwellings of magma approached the surface. The steam rising from the crater shone brightly, and among its clouds shadows soared in spirals along the edges of the steam column. One of the shadows dived dangerously toward the ground, risking destruction, but at the last moment it pulled up short to soar skyward again. Another followed, another, and Dark realized it was a game. Entranced, she hunched on the ridge and watched the flyers play. They did not notice her. No doubt they could see as well as she, but their eyes would be too dazzled by the heat's luminous blackness to notice an earthbound creature's armor-shielded warmth.

Sound and light burst upon her like explosions. Clearing the ridge that had concealed it, a helicopter leaned into the air and ploughed toward her. Until this moment she had not seen or heard or sensed it. It must have been grounded, waiting for her. Its searchlights caught and blinded her for a moment, till she shook herself free in an almost automatic reaction and slid across the bare rock to the earth beyond. As she plunged toward the trees the machine roared over her, its backwash blasting up a cloud of dirt and leaves the pebbles. The copter screamed upward, straining to miss treetops. As it turned to chase her down again, Dark scuttled into the woods.

She had been careless. Her fascination with the volcano and the flyers had betrayed her, for her stillness must have convinced the humans that she was asleep or incapacitated.

Wondering if it would do any good, she dug herself into the earth. She felt the helicopter land, and then the lighter vibrations of footsteps. The humans could find her by the same technique, amplifying the sounds of her digging. From now on they did not even need her beacon.

She reached a boundary between bedrock and earth and followed its lessened resistance. Pausing for a moment, she heard both movement and its echoes. She felt trapped between sounds, from above and below. She started digging, pushing herself until her work drowned out all other noises. She did not stop again.

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The humans could move faster down the steep terrain than she could. She was afraid they would get far enough ahead of her to dig a trench and head her off. If they had enough equipment or construction explosives, they could surround her, or simply kill her with the shock waves of a shaped charge.

She dug violently, pushing herself forward, feeling the debris of her progress slide over her shoulder-armor and across her back, filling in the tunnel as quickly as she made it. The roots of living trees, springy and thick, reached down to slow her. She had to dig between and sometimes through them. Their malleable consistency made them harder to penetrate than solid rock, and more frustrating. Dark's powerful claws could shatter stone, but they tangled in the roots and she was forced to shred the tough fibers a few strands at a time. She tired fast, and she was using oxygen far more quickly than she could take it in underground.

Dark slashed out angrily at a thick root. It crumbled completely in a powdery dust of charcoal. Dark's momentum, meeting no resistance, twisted her sideways in her narrow tunnel. She was trapped. The footsteps of the humans caught nearly up to her, and then, inexplicably, stopped. Scrabbling frantically with her feet and one clawed hand, her left front limb wedged uselessly beneath her, she managed to loosen and shift the dirt in the small enclosed space. Finally, expecting the humans to start blasting toward her any moment, she freed herself.

Despite the ache in her left shoulder, deep under her armor, she increased her pace tremendously. She was beneath the dead trees now, and the dry porous earth contained only the roots of trees that had burned from top to deep underground, or roots riddled with insects and decay. Above her, above ground, the treetrunks lay in an impassable tangle, and that must be why the humans had paused. They could not trench her now.

Gauging her distance to the basalt flow by the pattern of returning echoes, Dark tunneled through the last few lengths of earth. She wanted to go under the stone barrier and come up on the other side in safety. But the echoes proved that she could not. The basalt was much thicker than she had hoped. It was not a single flow but many, filling a deep-cleft valley the gods only knew how far down. She could not go under and she did not have time or strength right now to go through.

It was not the naked sheet of stone that would keep the humans from her, but the intangible barrier of the flyers' boundary. That was what she had to reach. Digging hard, using the last of her stored oxygen, Dark burst up through the earth at the edge of the lava flow and scrambled out onto the hard surface. Never graceful at the best of times, she was slow and unwieldy on land. She lumbered forward, pant-

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ing, her claws clacking on the rock and scraping great marks across it.

Behind her the humans shouted, as their detectors went off so loudly even Dark could hear them, and as the humans saw Dark for themselves, some for the first time.

They were close, they were very close. They had almost worked their way through the jammed tree-trunks, and once they reached solid ground again they could overtake her. She scrambled on, feeling the weight of her armor as she never did underground. Its edges dragged along the basalt, gouging it deeply.

Two flyers landed as softly as wind, as milkweed floss, as pollen grains. Dark heard only the rustle of their wings, and when she looked up from the fissured gray rock, they stood before her, barring her way.

She was nearly safe: she was just on the boundary, and once she was over it the humans could not follow. The delicate flyers could not stand up against her if she chose to proceed, but they did not move to let her pass. She stopped.

Like her, the flyers had huge eyes, to extend the spectrum of their vision. Armored brow-ridges and transparent shields were protected, too, but with thick black lashes that veiled and revealed them.

"What do you want, little one?" one of the flyers said. Its voice was deep and soft, and it wrapped its body in iridescent black wings.

"Your help," Dark said. "Sanctuary." Behind her, the humans stopped too. She did not know if they still had the legal right to take her. Their steel net scraped along the ground, and they moved hesitantly closer. The black flyer glared, and the human noises ceased. Dark inched forward, but the flyers did not retreat at all.

"Why have you come?" The black flyer's voice withheld all emotion, warmth, or welcome.

"To talk to you," Dark said. "We need your help."

The raven-winged flyer did not move, except to blink its luminous eyes. But its blue-feathered companion peered at Dark closely, moved a step one way, a step the other, and ruffled the plumage of its wings. The blue flyer's movements were as quick and sharp as those of a bird itself.

"We have no help to offer you," the black flyer said.

"Let me in, let me talk to you." Her claws ground against stone as she moved nervously. She could not flee, and she did not want to fight. She could crush the humans or the flyers, but she had not been chosen for her capacity for violence. Her pursuers knew that perfectly well.

Again the nets scraped behind her as the humans moved forward.

"We've only come for her," one of them said. "She's a fugitive — we don't want to involve you in any unpleasantness." The powerful searchlight he carried swept over Dark's back, transfix-

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ing the flyers, who turned their faces away. The harsh white illumination washed out the iridescent highlights of the black feathers but brightened the other's wings to the brilliant color of a Stellar jay.

"Turn out your lights," the jay said, in a voice as brash and demanding as any real bluejay's. "It's dawn — you can see well enough."

The human hesitated, swung the light away, and turned it off. He motioned to the helicopter and its lights faded. As the jay had said, it was dawn, misty and gray and eerie. The flyers faced Dark's adversaries again.

"We have no more resources than you;" the raven flyer said. "How do you expect us to help you? We have ourselves. We have our land. You have the same."

"Land!" Dark said bitterly. "Have you ever seen my land? It's nothing but piles of rotting stone and pits full of rusty water—" She stopped; she had not meant to lose her temper. But she was hunched on the border of captivity, straining toward sanctuary and about to be refused.

"Send her out so we can take her without violating your boundaries. Don't let her cause a lot of trouble."

"A little late for such caution," Jay said. "Redwing, if we bow to their threats now, what will they do next time? We should let her in."

"So the diggers can do to our refuge what they did to their own? Pits, and rusting water—"

"It was like that when we came!" Dark cried, shocked and hurt. "We make tunnels, yes, but we don't destroy! Please hear what I've got to say. Then, if you ask me to go ... I'll obey." She made the promise reluctantly, for she knew that once she had lived near the volcano, she would need great will to leave. "I give you my word." Her voice quivered with strain. The humans muttered behind her; a few steps inside the boundary, a few moments inside and then out — who, besides Dark, would accuse them of entering the flyers' territory at all?

Jay and Redwing glared at each other, but suddenly Jay laughed sharply and turned away. He stepped back and swept one wingtip along the ground, waving Dark into his land. "Come in, little one," he said.

Hesitantly, afraid he would change his mind, Dark moved forward. Then, in a single moment, after her long journey, she was safe.

"We have no reason to trust it!" Redwing said.

"Nor any reason not to, since we could just as well be mashed flat between stone and armor. We do have reason not to help the humans."

"You'll have to send her back," the leader of the humans said. He was angry; he stood glowering at the very edge of the border, perhaps a bit over. "Laws will take her, if we don't now. It will just cost you a lot more in trouble."

"Take your threats and your

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noisy machine and get out of here," Jay said.

"You *will* be sorry, flyer," the humans' leader said.

Dark did not really believe they would go until the last one boarded the helicopter and its roar increased, it climbed into the air, and it clattered off into the brightening gray morning.

"Thank you," Dark said.

"I had ulterior motives," Jay said.

Redwing stood back, looking at Jay but not at Dark. "We'll have to call a council."

"I know. You go ahead. I'll talk to her and meet you when we convene."

"I think we will regret this," Redwing said. "I think we are closer to the humans than to the diggers." The black flyer leaped into the air, wings outspread to reveal their brilliant scarlet underside, and soared away.

Jay laid his soft hand on Dark's shoulder-plate to lead her from the lava to volcanic soil. His skin felt frail, and very warm. Dark's metabolism was slower than it had been, while the flyers' chemistry had been considerably speeded up. Dark was ugly and clumsy next to him. She thought of digging down and vanishing but that would be ill-mannered. Besides, she had never been near a flyer before. Curiosity overcame her. Glancing surreptitiously sideways, beneath the edge of her armor, she saw that he was peeking at her, too. Their gazes met; they looked away, both embarrassed. Then Dark stopped and faced him. She settled back to regard him directly.

"This is what I look like," she said. "My name is Dark and I know I'm ugly, but I could do the job I was made for, if they'd let me."

"I think your strength compensates for your appearance," the flyer said. "I'm Jay." Dark was unreasonably pleased that she had guessed right about his name.

"You never answered Redwing's question," Jay said. "Why come *here?* The strip mines—"

"What could you know of strip mines?"

"Other people lived near them before they were given over to you."

"So you think we should stay there!"

Jay replied to her abrupt anger in a gentle tone. "I was going to say, this place is nicer than the strip mines, true, but a lot of places nicer than the strip mines are more isolated than we are. You could have found a hidden place to live."

"I'm sorry," Dark said. "I thought —"

"I know. Never mind."

"No one else like me got this far, did they?"

Jay shook his head.

"Six of us escaped," Dark said. "We hoped more than one would reach you. Perhaps I'm just the first, though."

"That could be."

"I came to ask you to join us," Dark said.

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Jay looked at her sharply, his thick flaring eyebrows raised in surprise. He veiled his eyes for a moment with the translucent avian membranes, then let them slowly retract.

"Join you? In ... your preserve?" He was polite enough to call it this time by its official name. Though she had expressed herself badly, Dark felt some hope.

"I misspoke myself," she said. "I came — the others and I decided to come — to ask you to join us politically. Or at least to support us."

"To get you a better home. That seems only fair."

"That isn't quite what we're hoping for. Or rather it is, but not the way you mean."

Jay hesitated again. "I see. You want ... what you were made for."

Dark wanted to nod; she missed the shorthand of the language of the human body, and she found she was unable to read Jay's. She had been two years out of contact with normal humans; or perhaps it was that Jay was a flyer, and his people had made adjustments of their own.

"Yes. We were made to be explorers. It's a useless economy, to keep us on earth. We could even pay our own way after a while."

Dark watched him closely, but could not tell what he thought. His face remained expressionless; he did not move toward her or away. Then he sighed deeply. That, Dark understood.

"Digger —"

She flinched, but inwardly, the only way she could. He had not seemed the type to mock her.

"— the projects are over. They changed their minds. There will be no exploring or colonizing, at least not by you and me. And what difference does it make? We have a peaceful life and everything we need. You've been badly used but that could be changed."

"Maybe," Dark said, doubting his words. The flyers were beautiful, her people were ugly, and as far as the humans were concerned that made every difference. "But we had a purpose, and now it's gone. Are you happy, living here with nothing to do?"

"We're content. Your people are all ready, but we aren't. We'd have to go through as much change again as we already have."

"What's so bad about that? You've gone this far. You volunteered for it. Why not finish?"

"Because it isn't necessary."

"I don't understand," Dark said. "You could have a whole new living world. You have even more to gain than we do, that's why we thought you'd help us." Dark's planned occupation was the exploration of dead worlds or newly-formed ones, the places of extremes where no other life could exist. But Jay's people were colonists; they had been destined for a world that was being made over for them, even as they were being suited for what it would become.

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"The terraforming is only beginning," Jay said. "If we wait until it's complete —"

"But that won't be for generations."

Jay shrugged. "We know."

"You'll never see it!" Dark cried. "You'll be dead and dust before it changes enough for people like you are now to live on it."

"We're virus-changed, not constructed," Jay said. "We breed true. Our grandchildren may want another world, and the humans may be willing to help them go. But we intend to stay here." He blinked slowly, dreamily. "Yes, we *are* happy. And we don't have to work for the humans."

"I don't care who I work for, as long as I can be something better than a deformed creature," Dark said angrily. "This world gives my people nothing and because of that we're dying."

"Come now," Jay said tolerantly.

"We're dying!" Dark stopped and rocked back on the edge of her shell so she could more nearly look him in the eye. "You have beauty all around you and in you, and when the humans see you they admire you. But they're afraid of us! Maybe they've forgotten that we started out human or maybe they never considered us human at all. It doesn't matter. I don't care! But we can't be anything, if we don't have any purpose. All we ask is that you help us make ourselves heard, because they'll listen to you. They love you. They almost worship you!" She paused, surprised by her own outburst.

"Worship us!" Jay said. "They shoot us out of the sky, like eagles."

He looked away from her. His gaze sought out clouds, the direction of the sun, for all she knew the eddies of the wind. Dark thought she sensed something, a call or a cry at the very edge of one of her new perceptions. She reached for it, but it eluded her. It was not meant for her.

"Wait for me at sunset," Jay said, his voice remote. He spread his huge furled wings and sprang upward, the muscles bunching in his short, powerful legs. Dark watched him soar into the sky, a graceful dark blue shape against the cloud-patterned gold and scarlet dawn.

Dark knew she had not convinced him. When he was nothing but a speck she eased herself down again and lumbered up the flank of the volcano. She could feel it beneath her feet. Its long rumbles pulsed through her, at a far lower frequency than she ever could have heard as a human. It promised heat and danger; it excited her. She had experienced no extremes, of either heat or cold, pressure or vacuum, for far too many months.

The ground felt hollow beneath Dark's claws: passages lay beneath her, and lava beaten to a froth by the violence of its formation and frozen by exposure into spongy rock. She found a crevice that would leave no trace of her passing and slid into it. She began to dig, slowly at first, then faster, dirt and pulverized stone flying over her

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shoulders. In a moment the earth closed in around her.

Dark paused to rest. Having reached the gas-formed tunnels, she no longer had to dig her way through the substance of the mountain. She relaxed in the twisted passage, enjoying the brilliance of the heat and the occasional shining puff of air that came to her from the magma. She could analyze the gases by taste: that was another talent the humans had given her. Vapors toxic to them were merely interesting scents to her. If necessary she could metabolize some gases; the ability would have been necessary in many of the places she had expected to see, where sunlight was too dim to convert, where life had vanished or never evolved and there were no organic chemicals. On the outer planets, in the asteroids, even on Mars, her energy would have come from a tenuous atmosphere, from ice, even from the dust. Out there the challenging extremes would be cold and emptiness, unless she discovered hot, living veins in dying planets. Perhaps now no one would ever look for such activity on the surface of an alien world. Dark had dreamed of the planets of a different star, but she might never get a chance even to see the moon.

Dark sought a living vein in a living world: she moved toward the volcano's central core. Her people had been designed to resist conditions far more severe than the narrow range tolerated by normals, but she did not know if she could survive this great a temperature. Nor did she care. The rising heat drew her toward a heightened state of consciousness that wiped away caution and even fear. The rock walls glowed in the infra-red, and as she dug at them, the chips flew like sparks. At last, with nothing but a thin plate of stone between her and the caldera, she hesitated. She was not afraid for her life. It was almost as if she were afraid she *would* survive: afraid the volcano, like all else, would finally disappoint her.

She lashed out with her armored hand and shattered the fragile wall. Steam and vapor poured through the opening, flowing past her. Before she stopped normal breathing she chanced a quick, shallow mouthful and savored the taste and smell, then moved forward to look directly into the crater.

Whatever she had imagined dissolved in the reality. She was halfway up the crater, dazzled from above by light and from below by heat. She had been underground a long time and it was almost exactly noon. Sunlight beat down through clouds of steam, and the gases and sounds of molten rock reached up to her. The currents swirled, hot and hotter, and in the earth's wound a flood of fire burned.

She could feel as well as see the heat, and it pleased her intensely that she would die if she remained where she was. Internal oxygen sustained her:

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a few deep breaths of the mountain's uncooled exhalations and she would die.

She wanted to stay. She did not want to return to the surface, to the probability of rejection. She did not want to return to her people's exile.

Yet she had a duty toward them, and she had not yet completed it. She backed into the tunnel, turned around, and crawled away, hoping someday she could return.

Dark made her way back to the surface, coming out through the same fissure so the land would not change. She shook the dirt off her armor and looked around, blinking, waiting for her eyes to reaccustom themselves to the day. As she rested, colors resolved out of the after-image dazzle of infrared: the blue sky first, then the deep green trees, the yellow of a scatter of wildflowers. Finally, squinting, she made out dark specks against the crystal clarity of the sky. The flyers soared in small groups or solo, now and again two coming together in lengthy graceful couplings, their wings brushing tips. She watched them, surprised and a little ashamed to be aroused despite herself. For her kind, intercourse was more difficult and more pedestrian. Dark had known how it would be when she volunteered; there was no secret about it. Like most of the other volunteers, she had always been a solitary person. She seldom missed what she had so seldom had, but watching the flyers she felt a long pang of envy. They were so beautiful, and they took everything so for granted.

The winged dance went on for hours, until the sun, reddening, touched mountains in the west. Dark continued to watch, unable to look away, in awe of the flyers' aerial and sexual stamina. Yet she resented their extended play, as well; they had forgotten that an earthbound creature waited for them.

The several pairs of coupled flyers suddenly broke apart, as if on signal, and the whole group of them scattered. A moment later Dark sensed the approach of the humans' plane.

It was too high to hear, but she knew it was there. It circled slowly. Sitting still, not troubling now to conceal the radio-beacon in her spine, Dark perceived it spiraling in, with her as its focus. The plane descended; it was a point, then a silver shape reflecting scarlet sunset. It did not come too close; it did nothing immediately threatening. But it had driven the flyers out of Dark's sight. She hunkered down on the stone promontory, waiting.

Dark heard only the sudden rush of air against outstretched wings as Jay landed nearby. His approach had been completely silent, and intent as she was on the search plane, she had not seen him. She turned her attention from the sky to Jay, and took a few steps toward him. But then she stopped, sham-

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ed once more by her clumsiness compared to the way he moved. The flyers were not tall, and even for their height their legs were quite short. Perhaps they had been modified that way. Still, Jay did not lumber. He strode. As he neared her he furled his wings over his back, folding them one bit at a time, ruffling them to smooth the feathers, folding a bit more. He reminded her not so much of a bird, as of a spectacular butterfly perched in the wind, flicking his wings open and closed. When he stopped before her his wings stilled, each bright blue feather perfectly placed, framing him from behind. Unconcealed this time by the wings, his body was naked. Flyers wore no clothes: Dark was startled that they had nothing to conceal. Apparently they were as intricately engineered as her own people.

Jay did not speak for so long that Dark, growing uncomfortable, reared back and looked into the sky. The search plane still circled loudly.

"Are they allowed to do that?" she said.

"We have no quick way of stopping them. We can protest. No doubt someone already has."

"I could send them a message," she said grumpily. That, after all, was what the beacon was for, though the message would not contain the sort of information anyone had ever planned for her to send.

"We've finished our meeting," Jay said.

"Oh. Is that what you call it?"

Dark expected a smile or a joke, but Jay spoke quite seriously.

"That's how we confer, here."

"Confer —!" She dropped back to the ground, her claws digging in. "You met without letting me speak? You told me to wait for you at sunset!"

"I spoke for you," Jay said softly.

"I came here to speak for myself. And I came here to speak for my kind. I trusted you—"

"It was the only way," he said. "We only gather in the sky."

Dark held down an angry retort. "And what is the answer?"

Jay sat abruptly on the hard earth, as if he could no longer support the weight of his wings on his delicate legs. He drew his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them.

"I'm sorry." The words burst out in a sigh, a moan.

"Call them," Dark said. "Fly after them, find them, make them come and speak to *me*. I will not be refused by people who won't even face me."

"It won't help," Jay said miserably. "I spoke for you as well as I could, but when I saw I would fail I tried to bring them here. I begged them. They wouldn't come."

"They wouldn't come...." She had risked her life only to have her life dismissed as nothing. "I don't understand," she whispered.

Jay reached out and touched her hand: it still could function as a hand, despite her armor and her claws. Jay's

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hand, too, was clawed, but it was delicate and fine-boned, and veins showed blue through the translucent skin. Dark pulled back the all too solid mass of her arm.

"Don't you, little one?" Jay said, sadly. "I was so different, before I was a flyer —"

"So was I," Dark said.

"But you're strong, and you're ready. You could go tomorrow with no more changes and no more pain. I have another stage to go through. If I did it, and then they decided not to send us after all — Dark, I would never be able to fly again. Not in this gravity. There are too many changes. They'd thicken my skin, and regress me again so my wings weren't feathered but scaled — they'd shield my eyes and reconstruct my face for the filters."

"It isn't the flying that troubles you," Dark said.

"It is. The risk's too great."

"No. What troubles you is that when you were finished, you wouldn't be beautiful anymore. You'd be ugly, like me."

"That's unfair."

"Is it? Is that why all your people flock around me so willingly to hear what I have to say?"

Jay stood slowly and his wings unfolded above him: Dark thought he was going to sail away off the side of the mountain, leaving her to speak her insults to the clouds and the stones. But, instead, he spread his beautiful black-tipped blue wings, stretched them in the air, and curved them around over Dark so they brushed the ridge of her spine. She shivered.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We have grown used to being beautiful. Even I have. They shouldn't have decided to make us in stages, they should have done it all at once. But they didn't, and now it's hard for us, being reminded of how we were."

Dark stared at Jay, searching for the remnants of how he had been until he became a flyer, understanding, finally the reasons he had decided to become something other than human. Before, she had only perceived his brilliant plumage, his luminous eyes, and the artificial delicacy of his bones. Now she saw his original proportions, the disguised coarseness of his features, and she saw what he must have looked like.

Perhaps he had not actually been deformed, as Dark had been. But he had never been handsome, or even so much as plain. She gazed at him closely. Neither of them blinked: that must be harder for him, Dark thought. Her eyes were shielded, his were only fringed with long, thick, dark eyelashes.

His eyes were too close together. That was something the virus-forming would not have been able to cure.

"I see," she said. "You can't help us, because we might succeed."

"Don't hate us," he said.

She turned away, her armor scraping on rock. "What do you care, if a creature as repellant as I hates you?"

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"I care," Jay said very quietly.

Dark knew she was being unfair, to him if not to his kind, but she had no sympathy left. She wanted to hide herself somewhere and cry. "When are the humans coming for me?"

"They come when they please," he said. "But I made the others promise one thing. They won't ask you to leave till morning. And if we can't find you, then — there's time for you to get away, if you hurry."

Dark spun around, more quickly than she thought herself able to. Her armor struck sparks, but they glowed only briefly and died.

"Where should I go? Somewhere no one at all will ever see me? Underground, all alone, forever?" She thought of the mountain and its perils, but it meant nothing now. "No," she said. "I'll wait for them."

"But you don't know what they might do! I told you what they've done to us —"

"I hardly think they'll shoot me out of the sky."

"Don't joke about it! They'll destroy anything, the things they love and the things they fear...."

"I don't care anymore," Dark said. "Go away, flyer. Go away to your games, and to your illusions of beauty."

He glared at her, turned, and sprang into the air. She did not watch him go, but pulled herself completely inside the shadows of her armor to wait.

Sometime during the night she drifted off to sleep. She dreamed of the fireflood: she could feel its heat and hear its roar.

When she awoke, the rising sun blazed directly into her eyes, and the steel blades of a helicopter cut the dawn. She tried and failed to blot out the sound of the humans' machine. She began to shiver, with uncertainty or with fear.

Dark crept slowly down the side of the mountain, toward the border where the humans would land. The flyers would not have to tell her to leave. She wondered if she were protecting herself, or them, from humiliation.

Something touched her and she started, drawing herself tightly into her armor.

"Dark, it's only me."

She peered out. Jay stood over her with his wings curved around them both.

"You can't hide me," she said.

"I know. We should have, but it's too late." He looked gaunt and exhausted. "I tried, Dark, I did try."

On the humans' side of the lava flow, the machine landed and sent up a fine spray of dust and rock particles. People climbed out, carrying weapons and nets. Dark did not hesitate.

"I have to go." She raised her armor up off the ground and started away.

"You're stronger than we are," Jay said. "The humans can't come and get

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you and we can't force you to leave."

"I know." The invisible boundary was almost at her feet; she moved reluctantly but steadily toward it.

"Why are you doing this?" Jay cried.

Dark did not answer.

She felt Jay's wingtip brush the edge of her armor as he walked alongside her. She stopped and glanced up at him.

"I'm coming with you," he said. "Till you get home. Till you're safe."

"It's no more safe for you. You can't leave your preserve."

"Nor could you."

"Jay, go back."

"I'll not lose another friend to the humans."

Dark touched the boundary. As if they were afraid she would still try to escape them, the humans rushed toward her and flung the net over her, pulling in its edges so it caught beneath her armor. They jostled the flyer away from her side.

"This isn't necessary," she said. "I'll come with you."

"Sorry," one finally said, in a grudging tone. "It's necessary."

"Her word's good," Jay said. "Otherwise she never would have come out to you at all."

"What happened to the others?" Dark asked.

One human shrugged.

"Captured," another said.

"And then?"

"Returned to the sanctuary."

Dark had no reason not to believe them, simply because they had no reason to spare her feelings if any of her friends were dead.

"You see, Jay, there's no need for you to come."

"You can't trust them! They'll lie to you for your cooperation and then kill you when I've left you with no witness."

That could be true; still, she lumbered toward the helicopter, more hindered than helped by the humans' tugging on the steel cables. The blades circled rhythmically over her.

Jay followed, but the humans barred his way.

"I'm going with her," he said.

She glanced back. Somehow, strangely, he looked even more delicate and frail among the normal humans than he had when she compared him to her own massive self.

"Don't come any farther, flyer."

He pushed past them. One took his wrist and he pulled away. Two of the humans grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him over the border as he struggled. His wings opened out above the turmoil, flailing, as Jay fought to keep his balance. A blue feather fluttered free and spiraled to the ground.

Dragging her own captors with her, pulling them by the net-lines as they struggled and failed to keep her on their side, Dark scuttled toward Jay and broke through the group of humans. The flyer lay crumpled on the ground, one wing caught awkwardly

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beneath him, the other curved over and around him in defense. The humans sprang away from him, and from Dark.

"Jay," she said. "Jay...."

When he rose, Dark feared his wing was crushed. He winced when he lifted it, and his plumage was in disarray, but, glaring at the humans, he extended and flexed it and she saw to her great relief that he was all right. He glanced down at her and his gaze softened. Dark reached up toward him, and their clawed hands touched.

One of the humans snickered. Embarrassed, Dark jerked her hand away.

"There's nothing you can do," she said. "Stay here."

The net jerked tighter around her, but she resisted it.

"We can't waste any more time," the leader of her captors said. "Come on, now, it's time to go."

They succeeded in dragging her halfway around, and a few steps toward the helicopter, only because she permitted it.

"If you won't let me come with her, I'll follow," Jay said. "That machine can't outpace me."

"We can't control anyone outside your preserve." Strangely, the human sounded concerned. "You know the kind of thing that can happen. Flyer, stay inside your boundaries."

"You pay no heed to boundaries!" Jay cried, as they pulled and pushed Dark the last few paces back into their own territory. She moved slowly, at her own speed, ignoring them.

"Stay here, Jay," she said. "Stay here, or you'll leave me with guilt as well as failure."

Dark did not hear him, if he answered. She reached the copter, and steeled herself against the discomfort of its noise and unshielded electrical fields. She managed to clamber up into the cargo hold before they could subject her to the humiliation of being hoisted and shoved.

She looked out through the open door. It was as if the rest of the world were silent, for she could hear and sense nothing but the clamor immediately around her. On the lava ridge, Jay stood still, his shoulders slumped. Suddenly his wings flared out, rose, descended, and he soared into the air. Awestruck once more, Dark watched through the mesh of the net. Jay sailed in a huge circle and glided into the warm updraft of the volcano.

The rotors moved faster, blurring and nearly disappearing. The machine rose with a slight forward lurch, laboring under the weight of the hunting party and Dark as well. At the same time, Jay spiralled upward through the glowing steam. Dark tried to turn away, but she could not. He was too beautiful.

The distance between them grew greater, until all Dark could see was a spark of bright blue appearing, then vanishing, among the columns of steam.

As the helicopter swung round, she

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thought she saw the spiral of Jay's flight widen, as if he were ignoring the threats the humans had made and cared nothing for warnings, as if he were drifting gently toward the boundaries of his refuge, gradually making up his mind to cross them and follow.

Don't leave your sanctuary, Jay, Dark thought. You don't belong out here.

But then, just before the machine cut off her view, he veered away from the mountain and in one great soaring arc passed over the boundary and into the humans' world.

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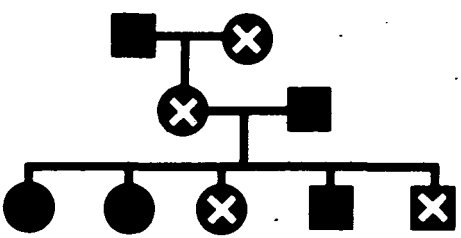

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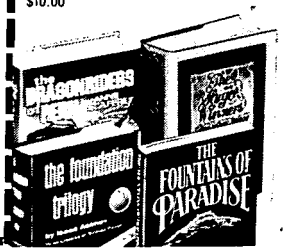

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